











## IF A BODY

by George Worthing Yates

Katheren Maynard really had no ambition to marry either a private detective or a fugitive from justice. She married both in the form of Hazlitt Woar . . . and anyone who took Woar acquired Caligula, his sad-eyed bulldog.

In *The Body That Wasn't Uncle* Katheren said good-bye to caution and "I will" to Hazlitt, and when this story opens, she is ensconced in a Buick between the potential convict and his faithful canine . . . fleeing across country. When an accident forced them to stop at a drab tourist camp, Woar took one look and muttered "sinister." Several hours later he found the body.

Ruth, a fragile redhead, said it was her husband. The police said "accidental death." All the tourists agreed. Woar buttoned his mouth and swallowed his convictions. A little publicity—and the long arm of the law would pick him up! Things were bad enough anyway. . . .

Back on the road, Katheren congratulated her spouse for his good sense and their escape. But everywhere they stopped, there was either Agatha Tozer or her mild husband Henry or her daughter Connie or the young trucking inspector or the big three of a California football team or the jovial Beardsleys or the movie magnate with Cicely, who said she was his wife. . . .

Katheren became more and more remote as Woar wavered and finally gave in to his detective inclinations. They would have ended in Reno but for that last gruesome scene on the California desert. . . .

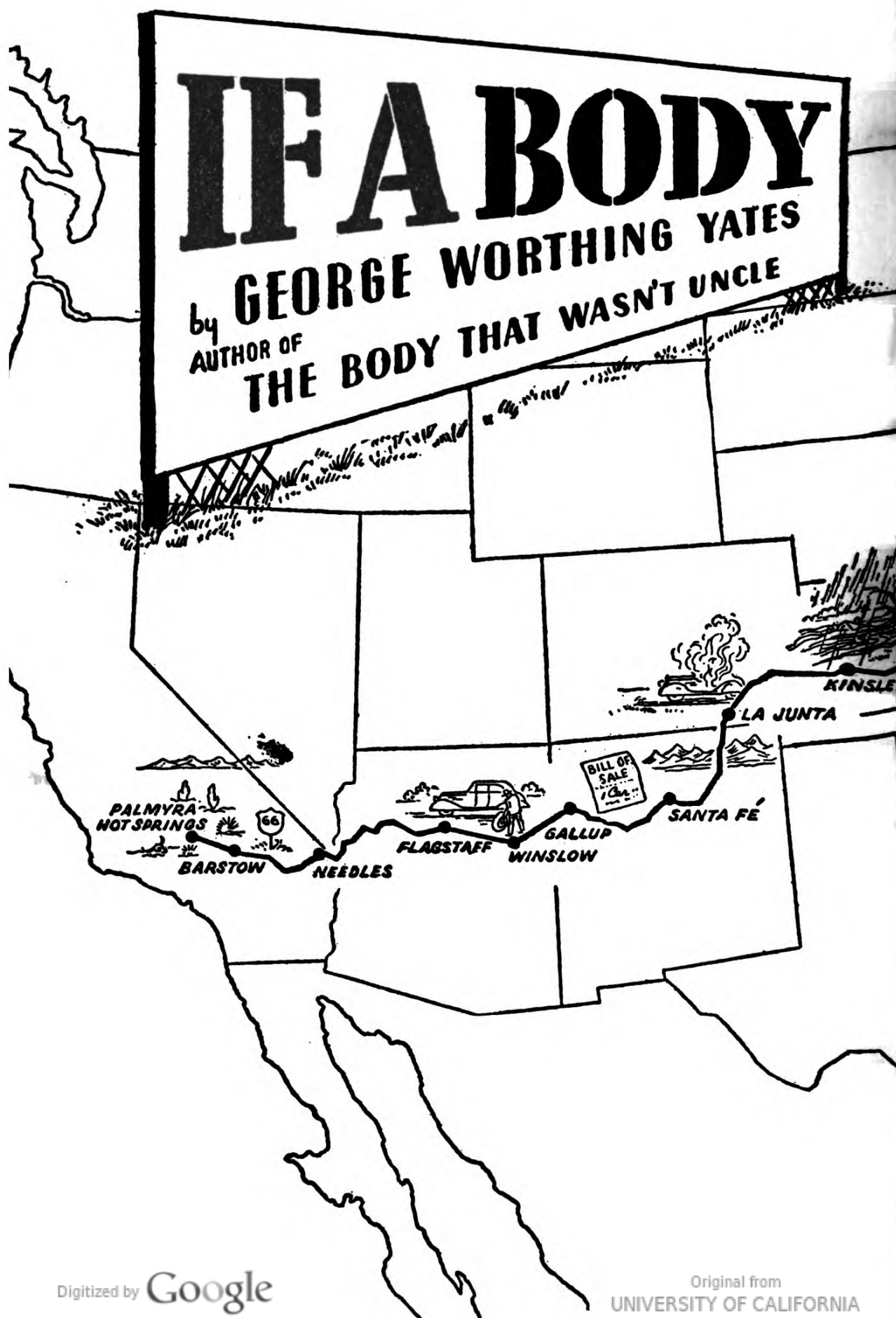




BY  
GEORGE WORTHING YATES  
*“THERE WAS A CROOKED MAN”  
THE BODY THAT CAME BY POST  
THE BODY THAT WASN'T UNCLE  
IF A BODY*

# IF A BODY

by **GEORGE WORTHING YATES**  
AUTHOR OF  
**THE BODY THAT WASN'T UNCLE**







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# IF A BODY

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GEORGE WORTHING YATES

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Alone

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**IF  
A BODY**



# THE A. A. A. TOURING GUIDE

## One

*"THE NATIONAL OLD TRAILS ROUTE from coast to coast is a trip every American motorist should make. . . ."*

*Introduction to  
Gouchard's Touring Guide.*

O r should he? U. S. Highway Number Forty, where it passes through western Pennsylvania, the tail of West Virginia and the hilly region in eastern Ohio, may not be the most suitable place for a bridegroom of a few days to wonder what his wife has against him. But Hazlitt George Brendan Woar, having heard nothing from Katheren Meynard Woar for a long time, couldn't help himself.

"My driving make you nervous? Would you like to take the wheel?"

Katheren cleared a throat that had seen no use during the last thirty miles and replied, "It's probably because I'm used to driving myself. I was thinking you must be tired, and this storm isn't letting up at all, and—do we have to make Columbus tonight just because the A.A.A. said so?"

"We can always wire the A.A.A. an apology. When I slow down, you slide under and I'll slide over."

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4. *IF A BODY*

So it was done.

"Will my driving make you nervous?" Katheren asked, somewhat belatedly. The Buick convertible sedan, in her hands, traveled westward at fifty again.

"Dearest Katheren, let's not go into that again. How's the dog?"

"He's been asleep all the way. I wish this wretched car in back would pass or do something. He's right on our tail."

"I know," said Woar complacently. "We picked him up coming into Wheeling. Very annoying. He's using us for a lead-horse."

"I'm not making you nervous, George?"

"No."

"I'm driving very carefully. Rest your eyes and relax."

"Right."

"I've never had an accident in my life."

"Ah, good!"

Fate isn't coy. Flirt, and Fate will gladly flirt too.

Not that the driver of the Buick didn't proceed carefully; not that she didn't know how slick was the surface under her tires and how limited her vision through the veil of rain; but that she stood not a ghost of a chance, the way things were arranged.

She was pouring all her attention down the dark funnel of onrushing road, curving steeply downhill, though not dangerously. She was touching a toe to the brake pedal to check her momentum. She was easing the machine round a wooded bend—when she came upon a man.

The man flung out his arms. He lunged straight for the wheels.

Doing what little she could, Katheren simultaneously

swerved, braked, blasted on the horns and prayed, but with no great confidence in any of these courses.

The Buick writhed into an elaborate sidewise skid. Woar stopped breathing and flung an arm across his wife to brace her for the crash.

The car behind couldn't see the man ahead. That was the essential flaw.

The car behind hit the Buick in the rear. The man ahead was suddenly swallowed up. The Buick's right front wheel bounced over a bump, one that was human and alive. Metal grunted against metal, a sickening yell ceased abruptly, and silence fell.

No more motion, no more sound, nothing but the intolerable vacuum that momentarily descends on every highway accident.

Katheren felt numb and dazed, but aware that George was dragging her from under the wheel and taking her place, for some reason that seemed good but rather vague. Why was everything so hushed, so quiet?

Breaking the silence at last came a reassuringly angry voice that had just regained breath and words, a voice that was at least still able to cry in pained satire through the raging storm, "What the hell do you think this is—a parking lot?"

## 2

The other car was a new Chrysler. It bore a Michigan license. Its driver opened his door, began climbing out.

Katheren sat stiffly upright, trying her neck and rubbing a sore shoulder.

"What happened, George?"

"We," her husband ruefully whispered, "are in for it. Don't get out."

"We ran over a man. I know that much."

He quickly kissed her cheek: "It's happened, Katheren. Let me do the talking. We're Mr. and Mrs. George Brendan. Will you remember, in case you're asked? Now, wish me luck. . . ."

He was pulling his hat down over his eyes and turning his mackintosh collar up about his chin and sliding out into the downpour to consult with the driver of the Chrysler before Katheren's wits could all be quite whistled home.

The two men muttered and made choppy gestures. They ran round to Katheren's side of the Buick and kneeled down. Katheren craned, and saw a pair of motionless legs projecting from underneath. She shuddered, and preferred to see no more.

Her husband's dog scrambled out of a canyon between two suitcases, where the smash had dumped him from his blanket on the back seat. He licked her hand and snuffled.

"Go to bed, Caligula."

Caligula, like any sensible elderly English bull-dog, found his warm spot and curled up to sleep again.

A limp body had been pulled from under the car. Katheren's husband crouched over it. His hands gleamed in the twilight reflected from the headlamps. He was feeling delicately for injuries, or for signs of life.

"What in God's name was he doing out in the middle of the road?" demanded the Chrysler man, with helpless anger and a quaver of panic in his voice.

Whatever George said, Katheren couldn't hear. She wound down her window then and asked, "Isn't there anything I can do?"

The stranger raised his eyebrows at her, peering close. His face reminded Katheren of all the bank pres-

idents she had ever seen. He shrugged almost the whole of his portly body, as if to say there was nothing anybody could do.

But George got to his feet, wiping his hands and smiling a wry, disgusted smile: "Why he isn't dead, I can't imagine."

"You mean he's—?"

"Could do with a doctor, probably. After all, a wheel rolled over him. He seems stunned, and very dirty, and very drunk. Otherwise, reasonably intact. No reason why we shouldn't move him out of the rain."

"Know your stuff, do you?"

"I'll accept responsibility, if you're thinking of spinal injuries. Take the legs, d'you mind?"

The perfect bank president looked immensely relieved and lifted the legs. The victim mumbled, and a fierce reek of whisky from him blew in upon Katheren. George said, "Your car, if you'll stand for it. No room in mine." So, not too tenderly, the reviving casualty was installed in the rear of the Chrysler sedan. Then George, for some reason or other, stalked away to one side of the road and disappeared into a thick growth of saplings, where his habitual electric torch glimmered for a moment, and likewise disappeared.

Which was very odd.

"If he's looking for a doctor," Katheren said to the middle-aged, quizzical face that came round to loom through her window, "I doubt if he'll find one in the woods tonight."

Water dripped from the end of the presidential nose: "Your husband says he thinks he saw another man. I told him he was dreaming. You didn't see another man, did you?"

"What other man?"

"He says he thinks he saw another man push this one out in the road and then duck off in the woods. Tell you the truth, he must have been dreaming. *I* didn't see any man!"

Katheren had an early inkling then of what horrors lay ahead; and, being a woman, shied away from them. She shook her head. She changed the subject, somewhat hurriedly.

"What now? Do we send for a tow-car, or what?"

"I had a look at the damage, and we can thank our lucky stars."

"We can?"

"Yes. My bumper got torn off, but that's nothing. You folks took a bad cut in your tire where my bumper hit it, and you can't go far on it—still, you can get somewhere. Question is, where? I'm lost. Came away without maps. Left 'em in my last car when I traded it in. This is new; I'm driving it straight from the factory, just breaking it in. So maybe you'll be good enough to tell me where on earth we're at?"

Katheren dug out Gouchard's Guide, thumbed a page and quoted, "*'Lady Bend Hill, very dangerous when wet.'* We know that much, don't we? Let's see. Twenty-two point five miles west of Wheeling, and fifty-something-odd east of Zanesville, Ohio. How's that?"

"Nothing nearer?"

"Well, I can give you 'Six Tourist Cabins, B Minus Rating, \$2.00 per person, at Migler's Mountain View Auto Camp and Filling Station, groceries, gas and oil, repairs.' It should be at the bottom of this hill, about a half mile from here. At least they'd have a phone there, wouldn't you think?"

He would. George appeared as oddly as he had dis-



appeared, choosing to say no more of another man in the bushes. About Migler's, he thought so too. The driver of the Chrysler, cheered by this harmony of purpose, grew quite genial:

"Well, there we are, folks. Excuse me, but would this little woman be Mrs. Brendan? How do you do. Hand's all wet and muddy. My name's Alden Beardsley, and the wife's is Mae. I want you to meet Mae when we get to Migler's, because I know you'll like her. A very sweet little woman, Mae is. Now, George, you better go ahead slow on account of that bad tire, and I'll follow right in back, so if anything happens I can lend a hand. Next stop, Migler's! Might as well get on our horses and be off, eh? . . ."

"As if we could do anything else," Katheren murmured when the Buick was moving on again, slowly, as prescribed. "Or have we a chance?"

"Tire may blow any moment. We'll bluff it through," said her husband.

"Beardsley oughtn't be hard to hoodwink. He seemed marvelously agreeable for a man who's just had his lovely new car smashed up. He's a lamb."

"Yes."

"George!"

"Eh?"

"I trust you, and I love you, but I want to know—what were you really looking for in the woods?"

"Murderer."

"At a time like this?"

"Well . . ."

"Do you want to give yourself away? Do you want to get caught and put in jail and deported? Do you *want* to?"

"Dearest Katheren!"

"You said you'd give up being a detective, George. If I'd married a retired green-grocer, I wouldn't expect him to be obsessed by cabbages for the rest of his life, and that applies to you and your murders."

He sighed.

"I'm sorry, Katheren. And I promise you I won't have anything to do with it."

"You probably imagined it all anyhow, you know."

"The man *was* pushed. Pushed in front of us, under our wheels. I saw it. I say that not for the sake of argument, mind! And I shan't ask why he was pushed or who pushed him. In the woods I found one practically empty flask, pint, unstoppered, of Old Spinning Wheel Straight Rye. Also one cheap ring, tarnished, dirty, sort you'd buy at Woolworth's, bearing a German silver death's head with bits of ruby glass for eyes. All recently deposited in mud mucked about with marks of two different sets of shoes. Those are clues, my dear. They're in the right-hand pocket of my mackintosh, where you can reach them. If you like, dig them out and throw them away, and we'll drop the matter, shall we? There's a good girl. . . ."

She took the flask out of his pocket, wound down the window and hurled it as far as she could. It tinkled faintly in the dark where it shattered to bits.

The ring still eluded her when she heard him warn, "Here's Migler's."

The place stood at the right of the road, in the folds of a dark, encroaching wood.

Far back the windows of tourist cabins shone through the rain. Close to the road, three goblin blobs of light—the usual three, ethyl, standard and economy—stood guard before a spineless, dismal building, a series of architectural afterthoughts strung together by some

inept carpenter. On the roof perched a weathered and dimly illuminated sign that said:

**MIGLER'S MOUNTAIN VIEW REST CABINS  
EVERYBODY SLEEPS HERE!**

The last dire pronouncement left Katheren weakly murmuring as she took her hand from her husband's pocket, "We'll skip out as quick as we can, George. I don't like it. It sounds dreadfully—I don't know what to call it!"

"Sinister," supplied her husband, and gave her one of his quick, humorless smiles.

That was definitely the word.

3

They brought the victim in. They stretched him out on a grocery counter, where he hiccoughed softly and tried to roll over to keep the light out of his eyes.

Katheren, having just spoken her mind to her husband for the first time in their brief married life, was gratified to see him make himself inconspicuous. Just as she hoped he would, he left everything to Beardsley.

Beardsley loudly demanded, "How about a doctor, quick?"

A couple who were obviously the Miglers, skinny man and skinny wife, stroked the pleats of flesh along their skinny necks and committed themselves to nothing. For that matter, they couldn't without screaming. A great blare of music poured out of a nickel-in-the-slot juke box, which someone had lately fed a glut of nickels. With inexhaustible industry it ground out full value.

"A doctor," Beardsley repeated at the top of his voice, "for this man here! A *doctor*!"

Mrs. Migler shuffled over to the juke box and turned down the volume.

Three spectators drifted over. Two were young, and obviously twins. They held in their hands the larger part of a Ford ignition system. Like a pair of Bedlington terriers, grave and oblique, they stared at Beardsley with deep interest.

The third, oldish and intelligent in appearance, greeted the newcomers with a friendly nod of his gray-haired head. Here, Katheren said to herself, is a man with some sense.

"This here," Migler announced, "is Mr. Tozer. You better talk to him."

"Found him up the road a piece, I suppose?" Tozer asked. He managed to add a contemptuous smile for the man on the counter.

"Do you know him?"

"We know him, all right! We were just beginning to think Mr. Shanley had quieted down for the night. Why did you have to bring him back here? Why couldn't you just chuck him in a ditch somewhere? We've had enough trouble with him. Do you people make a hobby of picking up drunks along the road, or what?"

"He might have been run down and killed," said Beardsley, who glanced at George, who glanced back at Beardsley and nodded. If that explanation was acceptable, why say more about it?

"Pity he wasn't," Tozer lamented. "Some people this world can do without. Shanley in particular. All right, Mr. Migler, get me some ammonia."

Migler went for ammonia.

Shanley muttered unintelligibly and stirred.

The little group about him lost every vestige of an interest that had never been cordial. The accident had conveniently dwindled to an incident. Katheren began to think they might at least get on to Zanesville that night. . . .

"Are you a lawyer?" one of the twins asked suddenly, pointing a piece of distributor at Beardsley.

"A lawyer? Not exactly, my boy, though I do know a smattering of law. Why?"

"I'm Boyd Winter," said the twin, "and this is my brother Burnet. We'd like to know if we can sue this drunk, or make a complaint or something."

"On any particular grounds?"

"Well, fairly particular," said Burnet bitterly. "He almost killed me, if that means anything to you. I've got a whole flock of witnesses."

Tozer contributed, "The boys are right; it came as close to downright manslaughter as anything I ever saw. Burnet here was looking under the hood of his car, when Shanley came along and knocked him flat in the mud. Pretty near ran over him. Too blind tight to steer past a red barn, not to mention a young man who wasn't wearing a tail light."

"When was this?" asked a voice. It was George's voice.

"Just about the time we were all pulling in for the night. Six o'clock, wouldn't you say, Migler?"

Migler released his chin wattle and nodded solemnly.

It had gone far enough, Katheren decided. She had seen the minute flaring of George's nostrils, noticed the dreamy, far-away look that came into his eyes, heard him put the first tentative question to these suspects who were busily confessing motives for an attempted

murder; so she nudged his elbow. Lest he mistake the nudge, she also took a firm grip on Caligula's leash and moved towards the door.

Boyd was saying darkly, "He's a menace. He's a potential killer of little dogs and children and innocent people, and something's got to be done about it. Believe me, we're sore!"

And Burnet was saying wearily, "Only this guy isn't interested and he's not a lawyer anyhow, so let's get that coke."

Grocery store, post office, motor accessories shop, short order restaurant and soda fountain abounded for the twins to choose among, and they chose to hoist their corduroys on stools at the fountain and turn the backs of their sweat-shirts to the room while Mrs. Migler prepared their cokes.

George was having difficulty getting away from Beardsley.

Migler came from the back of the shop with a quart bottle of household ammonia, which he gave to Tozer. Migler vouchsafed, "Go way out west to go to college, them two boys!" and pointed an awed finger at the Winter backs.

Tozer uncorked the ammonia, seized Shanley's head by its scant mousy hair and thrust his face into the fumes. Shanley winced and sneezed.

"That'll fix him," Tozer told them.

"Fissem," echoed Shanley, and tried to roll off the counter. With much help, he got unsteadily to his feet and blinked his bloodshot eyes. He brushed away the help, took a few tentative steps like a bold fledgling leaving the nest—and sneezed. Successfully recovering his balance, he tottered round Katheren and Caligula,



found the door by a miracle of blind faith, threw it open, and dove out into the night.

Tozer shook his head: "Now it begins again!"

Migler mused, "Drunks and little chillern, the good book says! You got to feel sorry sometimes for their wives, don't you now? Locked him out, Mrs. Shanley did, and who's gonna blame her? He'll sleep just as good in that Pontiac o' his as he will in a bed in Number Six, and never know the difference! Now, folks, I still got Number One and Number Five empty. No tellin' how long, this weather. Comes to ten dollars even, in advance."

"We'll be going on," said George. "We only want a tire changed."

"Not tonight. Change it first thing come morning, though."

"I'll change it myself, thanks just the same," and George made his adieux to Alden Beardsley.

"Takes a good man," said Migler to a tower of tinned peaches, "to jack up a wheel in this mud. Long ways to the next town, too. Maybe the hotel's got a bed there, maybe not. Storm's comin' on worse all the time. That's how people catch colds, drivin' at night in wet clothes. . . ."

The admonitions droned on, Tozer went over to inspect a shelf of fish bait in tins, the Winter twins fed more nickels into the juke box and George exchanged insurance company references with Beardsley, quite as if the Shanley adventure were decently over and done with.

Katheren stood impatiently at the door, almost pressing her nose against the wet glass.

It flew open in her face.

A spectacular blonde creature confronted her, and

after staring haughtily for an instant, said with great elegance, "I beg youah pahdon, I'm suah!" The accent was pseudo-British, and not washable.

Katheren retreated in awe against the post office partition.

The spectacle swished past her, stove-pipe hat, jacket of silver fox, black satin frock, lacy silk stockings and a pair of precarious, spindly high-heeled shoes. She left a whiff of heavy perfume in her wake. Wherever she came from, wherever she was bound, she did *not* belong in Migler's.

A half-smile, a quick lowering of the eyelids for George Brendan and Alden Beardsley, who were well dressed; seductive, that was meant to be.

Then the blonde waved crimson fingernails at the shelves of canned soup, imperiously demanding Cream of Shrimp, which Migler had never heard of.

George and Alden got their minds on insurance again.

Katheren, whistling soundlessly, began to read the post office announcement board, complete with the usual exhortations to Join the Army Now, air mail rates, and lesser handbills advertising weird-looking criminals. Katheren's glance passed casually over them, traveled a little way beyond, then reverted in horrified disbelief.

She recognized the lean, slightly amused face of her husband. A fair likeness, though the eyes and mustache had been touched up. Bold, black, unmistakable letters over it proclaimed:

### WANTED FOR DEPORTATION

Katheren checked the instant impulse to snatch it down. Mrs. Migler was watching her, wondering

whether to come over and sell her a stamp or not. Katheren assumed an appearance of innocent loitering, or tried to, and read through to the bitter end:

HAZLITT G. B. WOAR

May use an Alias. Poses as Scotland Yard Representative, Private Detective or Confidential Investigator. Nationality: British. Description: Age, 37; Height, 5' 11½"; medium slender build, dark hair & mustache, brown eyes, dresses quietly but well, speaks with English accent.

\$25.00 REWARD

will be paid to person giving information leading to arrest & apprehension of this man.

Notify:

Harry S. Hellenberger  
Public Prosecutor,  
Melton County, N. J.

"The post office," said Mrs. Migler's voice through the wicket, "ain't open at night, but if you just want a stamp—"

Katheren bought some stamps. Mrs. Migler had very sharp eyes, and undoubtedly a suspicious turn of mind. Katheren avoided even looking at the handbill again.

George was waiting for her, ready to leave.

"We'd better stay here, *I* think," she told him. "He's right about your driving in wet clothes. Mr. Beardsley's sensible, he's staying. How much did Mr. Migler say it was?"

Two dollars per person, including use of stove, running water, and shower bath right there any time you want it. *And* a dollar apiece deposit on each of the cabins, against the possibility of flying by night with the

cabin furnishings. Ten dollars all told for two couples in two cabins.

George behaved beautifully. He raised his eyebrows no more than an eighth of an inch, and drew five dollars from his pocket. Beardsley produced his five. Migler clutched at the money, and his wife offered them a selection of keys from a cigar box.

"Which is which?" asked Beardsley.

"Don't make no never mind," Mrs. Migler dismissed the matter. "Them's pass keys. All keys here is pass keys. Ain't had regular keys for pretty near on three years now. . . ."

She departed through a threadbare curtain that apparently led into the Migler living quarters. Migler went to Tozer in the tinned-bait department. The spectacular blonde hugged her soup to her breast, apparently done with her shopping. The Winter twins were concentrating on their ignition problem.

Except for Alden Beardsley, then, the coast about the announcement board was clearing nicely. Alden stood at the door, beckoning out into the storm.

Beckoning to his wife, it proved.

She came in, cheerfully stamping the muddy slop from her neat shoes. Alden put an arm about her shoulders, led her to the Woars and said, "Brendans, this is Mae. Now Mae and I were talking about you two on the way along—no harm if I get a little personal, is there?—and she said—"

Mae, small, round, trim and genial, shushed her husband. He over-rode the shushing.

"Anyhow, we got a bet on you folks. Want to settle it for us? Now don't blush, Katheren! Don't haul off and hit me, George! I had an idea you two just got

married recently and you were on your honeymoon. Am I right?"

When two people, eminently sensible and prosperous, and both somewhere beyond fifty, twinkle at you after a question like that, there's little you can do other than what Katheren did:

"How on earth did you find us out?"

"Why, my girl, when you're our age, you'll spot a newlywed a mile off. . . ."

Alden took his hat off (displaying a crop of curly, iron-gray hair that would do justice to the best bank in the land); he made a little bow, and shook hands with her.

Mae said, "When you get to know us better, you won't mind us so much, either of you! Just a couple of old busybodies, interested in nice young people, getting all the fun we can out of life! If Alden was wrong, he was going to ask you to our cabin and buy you a little drink, but since *he* isn't wrong—"

"Ah! We're the mugs," said George. "Will you do us the honor, and I'll see what can be dug out of our suitcase?"

Everybody joined arms.

George and Alden contended for the right to open the door.

The wind came in, fluttering the handbills on the announcement board.

"Go ahead, all of you," said Katheren. "I'll be right along. I have to buy something. Some eggs. We need eggs, George."

"Do we? Of course, right! Cabin Number Five, Katheren."

"I won't forget—Number Five."

The three of them vanished in a swirl of rain.

"Pahdon me, *if* you please!"

It was the spectacular blonde again, awkwardly embracing two cans as if to make it clear that such shopping was quite an experience for her, sidling sinuously past Katheren, mincing off into the darkness and mud on her high heels.

The time was ripe for what Katheren had to do; but the handbill was not.

It had disappeared.



## Two

Katheren, being a sensible businesswoman (Meynard & Cramshaw, Literary Agents, Madison Avenue, New York City), told herself that it couldn't have got very far in the three minutes or less in which her eyes had been off the announcement board.

Woar might have been identified by someone in need of twenty-five dollars. That was the worst snag.

But the Winter twins still sat at the soda fountain, engrossed in their ignition problem. They hadn't budged. Mr. Tozer had moved to the center of the store, where he and Migler fiddled with fishing reels. Tozer threw Katheren a whimsical little smile that might have meant almost anything. And Mrs. Migler hadn't returned at all.

Also the elegant creature in the fox fur asked to be considered. Katheren, in spite of the fox fur, was cynical about the lengths people would go for money these days.

However, she couldn't do anything about that now, and she could search the floor, where the handbill might have been blown by the wind.

"Six eggs," she told Migler, "a loaf of bread, a quarter pound of your best butter and a package of tea . . . coffee. . . ."

With Migler occupied, she hunted beneath counters and in corners. She hunted very carefully. In vain. Somebody in Mountain View Rest Camp knew the worst about the Woars. No use deluding herself, that somebody might have telephoned the nearest town already for the police.

While she stood dismally anticipating her husband's capture and waiting for Migler to dig up change for the bill she had given him, the door opened and a man came in. She had never seen him before. She expected never to see him again. Therefore she barely noticed him till he stood over her and bowed:

"Hello. Lot of swell music going to waste. What do you say, want to dance?"

It was so surprising and irrelevant, Katheren couldn't help herself. She laughed. A silly laugh, and a little wild, she supposed, but there it was, forcing its way out of her.

The man had a very definite and handsome kind of face, which promptly looked offended.

"I wash myself, I'm clean," he said, and spread two huge, hard hands in front of her for inspection. "If you don't want to dance with me, just say so. What's the matter, anyhow?"

"I don't even know who you are!"

"That we can clear up quick," he assured her, and reached into a hip pocket for a battered bill-fold, letting her see that it was fat with money and at the same time taking a business card from it:

*White Spot Interstate Trucking Corp.  
Chicago.*

*NICK LEEDS, Traffic Inspector  
Residence, 40201 No. Alexandria  
Los Angeles, Calif.*

"Really, I'm grateful, Nick, but as it happens—"

"Still worried? Ask Migler. I stop here all the time. I'm through this way every week."

In spite of his marled ears and an awesome muscular frame that bulged the seams of his leather windbreaker jacket when he moved, Nick Leeds was young and impressionable and, Katheren gathered, easily hurt. And he was not the kind of man Katheren could wish to hurt. So she confessed:

"I have to cook my husband's dinner," and reached for the change Migler was counting out for her.

"You didn't look like you were married."

"Don't mention it. Very kind of you to say that."

"A guy makes those mistakes, you know."

He turned on his heel, thrust his hands deep in his trouser pockets and shouldered across the store to the soda fountain, where he canted a hip on a stool.

Katheren had to pick up the unwanted groceries and run; but not in abject dread. If she's just been tacitly told her eyes are attractive, her skin and figure younger than they have a right to be, and her clothes as nice as she thought they were when she bought them—a woman can face anything.

## 2

Cabins One, Three and Five, little wooden shacks, confronted Cabins Two, Four and Six across a rectangular and feebly lighted quagmire. Lean-to shelters attached to each cabin protected the occupants' cars.

At the far end, a long white shed marked "Ladies—Gents—Showers" closed the rear of the court. At the end nearest the road, on drier ground, stood Migler's store and a huge object like a loaf of aluminum bread

on wheels. The Tozer trailer at its moorings in the trailer park, as it turned out.

Sinister, Woar had called it.

For the first time, Katheren caught the full force of the word, stripped of irony. Sinister and malignant that dismal auto court looked now, in the shifting shadows thrown by a few bare light bulbs swaying in the gale on the ends of their wire stems.

A human silhouette wavered between the bath and Number Six—Shanley on his unconsolable drunken prowl. He vanished into the blackness under Six's car shed. Shanley's cabin and Shanley's car—and none of her business anyway.

She shivered at a trickle of rain that ran down her neck and hurried all the faster to the door of Number Five, and light and warmth and her husband.

The inside belonged to a gigantic and unyielding iron bed, to the exclusion of almost everything else—even Katheren, till she managed to squirm between the foot of it and the plasterboard wall and so get to the kitchen.

Woar and the Beardsleys squatted on the counterpane, oriental fashion. The former, with his shoulders propped against a bed-post, drank whisky and water out of a teacup as if a comfortable eternity lay before him.

She called, "George," though, and he stirred himself and came.

"Did you feed Caligula?"

"Forgot!"

"Never mind. I'll do it," and she added in a whisper close into his ear, "Get rid of *them*, quick. Don't ask why."

He didn't.

Alden was the kind of man who could look dignified squatting on a bed. In his rich, deep, confidence-inspiring voice, raised so the Brendan-Woars could hear him in the kitchen, he was bumbling on, "What I was afraid of was a damage suit—estate tied up by some damn shyster lawyer! Man in my position can't be too careful! And that reminds me—you youngsters being just married, maybe you're thinking of investing for that well-known nest egg in the near future. Glad to give you any advice I can."

He flourished a card at George as he emerged from the kitchen. It said, "Alden Beardsley, New York, Chicago, Santa Barbara," and by way of a glittering generality, "Investments."

George flung himself on the bed, dropping his head on a pillow and cocking wet shoes up on the coverlet. Katheren, opening a can of dog food, could see the wicked, fitful glint in his half-closed eyes. She heard him drawl, "Thanks, Beardsley—"

Mae lifted her cup overhead:

"Just a minute. Before anybody talks business, here's to the bride and groom and long happiness together. Drink up, Alden. And say—if they're driving out to California, why don't they come and see us in Santa Barbara? Give them our address, dear. Katheren, you'll love it! We got the habit, and we winter there every year. I don't know anybody we'd rather have come to see us—"

Those amiable Beardsleys! The new-born friendship was instantly exposed on a mountainside to die.

"Have much trouble with the police?" asked Woar, again in a drawl, supremely indolent, markedly different from his usual clipped accent.

At that sudden shot across their bows, the Beardsleys

gaped. They were taken aback. Who was Katheren to blame them?

For half a minute, rain pounded and the tip of George's shoe traced intricate patterns in the air. Then Alden recovered enough to pass the question off as a tasteless joke. He smiled a lofty, righteous smile and shook his head.

"Not yet, eh? Better keep your fingers crossed," Woar advised. He sat up, stared hard at the two: "Who is Shanley, where from, why wanted dead? What's the game?"

Alden and Mae jumped, or the equivalent from a squatting posture.

"Don't jump for my benefit. I'm not impressed. It's a bloody game, it's murder, which entails electrocution, hanging and other discouraging penalties. Do you understand?"

Mae started to protest.

"No, it's not a nice conversation, Mrs. Beardsley. I'm not a nice man, either. I'm wondering if our little motor smash this evening was a coincidence—or did you know that at such an hour, a pedestrian would be shoved out under the wheels of a passing west-bound car; yours if you went ahead of me, mine if you stayed behind? Delicate point. Oh, he was shoved, no doubt about it. I'll undertake to convince any jury that I caught a glimpse of the man who did it in the margin of my lights. Better, let's hope Shanley lives. Let's hope he's shoved under no more cars tonight. Convey the hope to Migler, and Tozer, and the twins, and save us all much trouble with the police—will you?"

George arose and opened the door for them. The storm pounced in and ruffled the room.

Bewildered, indignant, offended, outraged, the Beardsleys stalked to the opening.

Mae called weakly to Katheren in the kitchen, but definitely not to George, "My dear, thanks ever so much for the drink. It was very nice."

Alden warned nobody in particular, "I wouldn't go imagining a lot of wild things if I were you!"

They both cast constrained little lemon-drop smiles over their shoulders and ducked out into the rain.

Woar shut the door.

"Did you *have* to do it that way?" Katheren wanted earnestly to know.

"Dearest Katheren, I got rid of them," he said wistfully. "I give you my word, I wasn't detecting. I gave fair warning, just in case. The very least I could do for Shanley. In all fairness, wasn't it?"

"You're still a detective. You can't see the woodpile for the niggers in it."

He looked bewildered and repentant, and dug his pipe into his tobacco pouch.

"Ordinarily, George, I wouldn't mind in the least. It's the way you're made, I suppose—but this time I'm sure you're wrong, and besides, you've given yourself away to those people in the worst possible manner under the circumstances," and she told him the circumstances.

He didn't light his pipe.

He pocketed it, kissed her and said, "It's rotten, Katheren, but don't let it get you down. I shan't be caught in this hole. There's time enough, if we don't waste it. . . ."

He had to mount the spare wheel first; a job of about twenty minutes, with luck. Having backed the Buick under the shed, George was grunting at it while Katheren started water boiling for a quick cup of tea.

Only a bride, cooking in a strange kitchen for a husband almost equally new and strange—and who, by the way, when changing to dry shoes left the wet ones out to be stumbled over—Katheren nevertheless knew all about watched pots not boiling. She put the shoes under the bed and watched out the front window.

Uneasy serpents of light wriggled across the rain puddles. Everybody Sleeps Here!

Very much awake, the Winter twins had a light in the car shed of Number Four. They had finally got down to installing the repaired ignition system in their old Ford. Through the window of Number Four, Katheren could see another young man publicly changing his clothes.

Within Number Six a reddish head moved busily about—Mrs. Shanley, probably. She was singing at her work—singing in a low, husky, agreeable voice just loud enough to be heard above the wind and rain. “*I’m Nobody’s Baby . . .*” She sang well, that Mrs. Shanley! Nick Leeds, striding through the mud, stopped to listen. Then, remembering the rain, ducked into his cabin, Number Three. His door banged shut.

Almost at once Mr. Tozer appeared with a slim girl who hopped beside him, clearing the wettest spots in graceful bounds. She had on slacks and a red waterproof with a hood that covered her hair. For no particular reason, Katheren supposed the girl was Tozer’s daughter.



Out for a stroll in the rain?

No, they paused in front of Number Four and talked a moment with their heads close together.

The red waterproof nodded to something Tozer said, then ran on alone to Number Six and knocked. Mrs. Shanley opened the door, the waterproof went inside. After that Mrs. Shanley appeared at the window—to draw down the blind.

As if that were a signal, Tozer went into Number Four without knocking. Katheren craned a little. She could see the semi-nude young man present his face for close inspection, then his fists and forearms. Tozer was examining him like a doctor his patient. Both gesticulated oddly, almost violently. Then Tozer turned to the window and that blind also was drawn.

Katheren wondered at herself. She felt tense, expectant, restless with anxiety to be off, to be away from Migler's, and the missing handbill and the drunken Shanley failed to account for the feeling entirely.

Caligula sympathized. He growled and snuffled at an inaudible sound beyond the crack under the door. He followed her to the kitchen, guarding her, when she went to pour the boiling water into a cracked and ugly teapot.

That pot, so ugly that it was funny, and the scent of tea and the worn shelves, the hissing gas ring, the cheap, chipped cups and plates she had to do with, brought back Katheren's sense of humor and perspective.

"You're a grand dog," she told Caligula, who always responded to flattery, "but you worry too much. This is just an ordinary auto camp. You'll get used to them before this trip is over. Now go lie down."

Half convinced, Caligula sprawled on the floor. He

kept his ears cocked, though, and his muzzle pointed warily toward the door.

Katheren melted butter in a frying pan with a cooked egg or two in view. Scrambled, poached, fried or how? Better ask George.

Before she could reach the door, the lights went out. They went out everywhere.

In the darkness Katheren bumped her elbow on the foot rail of the ungainly bed. Her funnybone, too. She saw stars and felt sickish.

Caligula set up a scrabbling and woofing at the door. What on earth was the matter with him?

She conquered her queasiness, groped her way round the end of the bed and found the door knob. It seemed to take an outrageously long time. The cabin had taken advantage of the total dark to expand and rearrange itself.

She scolded Caligula into behaving himself. She leaned out into the wind and called—but what she said when George responded had nothing to do with eggs. She knew at once why the dog had woofed.

“Look over there, George, quick!”

“Where, my dear?”

“At the Shanleys’ car! I think—*isn’t* that fire?”

“Don’t come out. It is,” said Woar, and ran.

## 4

There was more running and shouting, and then the lights came on. The butter was sizzling. Katheren attended to it and the eggs. When she finished, Woar stood dripping at her elbow, smiling beautifully.

“Don’t grin. What was wrong?”

“Fortunately for Mr. Shanley, who was sound asleep

in his car," he told her, and unblushingly began stripping off his thoroughly soaked clothes, "you noticed the fire in time. Otherwise he'd have been a fragrant kipper by now."

"How did it happen? And the eggs are ready, by the way."

Woar rubbed himself with a towel and sniffed hungrily.

"The little darlings are scrambled, too. Ah! The fire? Oh, wads of oily rag and paper under the cowl. What they were there for, I can't imagine. Another whisky flask—old Spinning Wheel Straight Rye, empty. And Shanley drunk as the Prince Regent. Or a hoot-owl, if you prefer. And toast! *And* tea! It's magnificent."

He twisted the towel around his bare middle and made ready to sit down to table. Someone knocked at the door. He looked appalled.

"I'll go," said Katheren.

She opened the door only far enough to put her head out, and saw the reddish hair of Mrs. Shanley, wet and glistening with rain. Turned up to the light, her face was haggard, desperate, but unforgettably beautiful. The woman stared at Katheren a moment with wide eyes. They were very large eyes, soft and guileless, and now they were piteous, like the eyes of a lost spaniel.

"Can I speak to your husband?" she implored in a low, husky voice.

"I'm afraid he hasn't any clothes on. Could you wait—"

"No, it—it doesn't matter. Don't bother him. I'll go next door."

She whisked herself away before Katheren could reply.

She knocked on the door of Number Three, Nick

Leeds's cabin. No answer. She hurried on toward One, and that was the last Katheren could see of her.

"Mrs. Shanley. She probably just wanted to thank you," Katheren told George, though the explanation wasn't quite adequate, considering the look in those eyes. However, "What did you do?"

"Beardsley came over, and the Winter twins and Tozer and a stocky little brute from Number Two. We put the fire out. A pip-squeak fire at best. Shanley seemed to resent our attentions, so we put him in charge of that enormous chap in Three—Leeds, his name is."

"I know him."

"Do you? Anyhow, there was no disaster, and I pity Mrs. Shanley from the bottom of my heart. That's that. Did I tell you the spare is also flat?"

"No!"

"It is, my dear. I was about to try the hand pump when the lights went off. Blown fuse, I was given to understand. Well, darling—happy days!"

He raised his tea-cup.

"Sugar?"

"In tea? No, thanks."

"Never?"

"Never in tea. Always in coffee. Altogether marvelous, Kay."

"What?"

"These eggs."

She put down knife and fork, and swallowed the piece of toast that encumbered her mouth.

"George, please stop being cheerful and beating around the bush. I know what you're thinking. It *was* another try at murder, wasn't it?"

He stared at the leaves in the bottom of his empty tea-cup and nodded.

"What are you going to do?"

He shrugged. "What can I do?"

She got up and went round to his side of the table, primarily to pour him another cup of tea. Instead she put her hands on his shoulders and gripped them tightly.

"It's horrible."

"It's frightfully clumsy."

"George, you *must* get that tire pumped up right away. You're not in Scotland Yard any more, you're not a policeman or a detective really. You're just a— a man, with a wife, on a motor trip. You don't have to see any more than other men see. You don't have to know any more. You don't have to think and analyze. Do you?"

"Do I? I don't know."

"You talked about settling down in some business or other. Remember, yesterday, when we left New York? All right, you stopped being a detective yesterday, and you're an ordinary businessman now. What business exactly, I don't know, but we'll think of one."

He put his hand over one of hers and said, "Katheren, you're amazing."

"I mean it, George. Drink another cup of tea now, and fix that tire."

He drank his tea. He thrust his legs into dry flannels, pulled on an old tennis sweater and dug out his third pair of dry shoes for the day.

He was bending over, tying the laces when they heard the sound of a car starting up across the court.

Katheren went to the window. She pulled the edge of the blind enough to look out.

"An old Pontiac," she told him.

"Shanley's car."

"Is it? I can't believe he's sober enough to—well, anyhow, it's gone now."

"Where?"

"Along the highway somewhere. Let's forget it."

Unwilling to be forgot, the sound of the motor echoed weirdly through the trees. It seemed to stall, start up again, roar along in one of the lower gears, and so dwindle away toward the west.

Woar bundled himself up in his well-worn mackintosh. Katheren thought he looked unhappy, defeated. She was sorry but unrepentant.

"Don't bother with your wet things," she told him. "I'll wrap them in a newspaper."

He wasn't listening to her.

He had paused in the open doorway, his head cocked, his lips sucked in, waiting mournfully for the crack of doom.

It came, and it rattled the dishes. First a heavy, distant, rolling thunder, next a long-drawn-out scream of tires, finally an intense crash, reverberating again and again, hushing the storm. At last, silence.

A stunned silence, out of which Migler's came slowly to life. Someone shouted a question. A door slammed. More doors, more voices, and running feet and questions back and forth . . .

Katheren and George stood looking at each other awkwardly, trying to get on from there, finding it momentarily impossible.

Woar gradually relaxed his shoulders and murmured, "I think that would be *it*."

## 5

Nick Leeds took over, did most of what had to be done.

He summoned police, ambulance and the wrecking car. He set red warning flares to stop traffic along the blocked road. He forced the reluctant Migler to fill and light his stock of lanterns from the store. They were already in use at the scene of the wreck when the Woars showed up.

A giant White Spot six-wheeler had come to grief. The tractor unit stood on its nose in a culvert mouth. The trailer, ripped and spewing its freight, lay overturned across the highway. Small and incongruous by contrast, the remains of Shanley's old Pontiac looked like a child's toy tossed away after long use. It squatted on its axles in a bramble patch.

Shanley had been taken out of the wreckage and stretched on the grass. Migler's shaky hand was holding one of the lanterns over him. Mae hovered near with an umbrella shielding the victim from the rain.

"Can't we do something for him?" she appealed to George. "Can't we help him?"

"Get him in where it's warm," said Migler, unasked.

"Hardly worth while," George told them. "He's dead."

More concerned for the living, Woar waded through brambles to the side of the other casualty, the swamper. Faces haggard in the lantern light bent low over the unconscious body.

"He never knew what hit him," the truck driver grieved for his assistant. "He was gettin' some sleep."

The truck driver spat from a bloody mouth. His eyes

were full of wonder. Nick growled at him, "Your swamper's all right. Bang on the head. Concussion. He won't die. Forget it."

Tozer solemnly agreed, and added that he "knew a little about medicine, enough to tell that much."

Perhaps the truck driver saw a glint of accusation in Traffic Inspector Leeds's sharp eye. At any rate, he wiped his bleeding lips and began to protest, "I swear on my mother's grave I was usin' my gears, I was slowin' up ready to take on gas at Migler's, I was crawlin' along—and this has to happen to me!"

"How fast?" asked Nick.

"Forty, maybe thirty-five, I swear it!"

"Make it thirty-five."

"Thirty-five, sure. You'd kill yourself goin' any faster on these bends east of Hendrysburg. I'm tellin' you, I sees this jalopy, no lights, no nothin', comin' at me on my side o' the road. I swings over. I think I'm clearin' it, only I skids and my trailer connects. Bing, and I'm in a ditch, spittin' good teeth!"

"The other guy?"

"The jalopy? Pretty fast, on the wrong side. Drunk, I swear it!"

"Anybody else on the road?"

"Not a soul in sight, and it's a straight road to Migler's, and I could see the gas pumps all lit up. I know what I'm tellin' you, Nick!"

"Sure, but I got to know what you're tellin' the cops."

Nick made off with one of the lanterns then, to draw a plan of the scene in triplicate for the accident insurance report. Catastrophe was all in the day's work.

The ambulance slithered up beyond the overturned trailer, then the wrecking car. The truck driver and



his unconscious swamper were whisked into the former, and out of the latter came two men in yellow slickers who dragged clanking lengths of heavy chain about and snarled at people who got in their way.

People, what with the storm and being snarled at, began to straggle back towards the lights of Migler's, a hundred yards down the road.

The show was over.

George found Katheren in the lee of the overturned trailer, where she was emptying pebbles out of her shoes.

"Remarkable," he observed, "how well they manage these things."

"This is no time to be British, George."

"No offense meant."

"None taken. I'm wet and cross. Can we be on our way?"

He was considerate. He lit a cigarette for her before he told her, "Not a chance, my dear. The police would probably have us stopped in the next town, if only to find out why we ran away."

"And if we don't—?"

"We'll be questioned along with the rest. If we look innocent enough, we might even get away with it."

"You know how I feel about that."

"Abundantly."

"I loathe Migler's and I expect us to be sold down the river any moment now for a measly twenty-five dollars reward."

"I loathe Migler's too, Katheren; but with faint, growing surprise I discover we aren't sold down the river yet, and I'm beginning to think we may not be. Whoever made off with that handbill could be clever

enough to realize it's worth more than twenty-five. Fifty perhaps. Not to the police but to us."

"Blackmail."

"Good old blackmail," said George, and took her arm to lead her back towards Migler's.

## 6

A few benighted tourists held up by the wreck in the road passed through. The police car tore by the Woars and sprayed them with the mist boiling up from its wheels. It slewed in at the entrance to Migler's.

Watching it, Katheren suffered a fresh pang of dismay. In spite of her husband's calm assurance, she felt dismally trapped.

Beardsley materialized out of the darkness like an untimely ghost. He stopped them by the simple expedient of getting in their way.

"Something we have to get straight with you, Brendan," he said. Katheren noticed oddness in his voice, hostility or a note of warning. She didn't like it.

"We?" asked George.

With a short jerk of his head towards the far side of the road, Beardsley pointed out a glimmering lantern surrounded by legs. Migler's legs and Tozer's, and two other pairs, as yet anonymous.

"Right," said George. "You don't mind, Katheren? I shan't be long."

In mystification and uneasiness, Katheren walked the rest of the way to Migler's alone.

Mrs. Migler waited for her on the porch of the store, and beckoned her with a ledger.

"You folks didn't register," she whispered, and by

way of explanation waved a pencil stub towards the windows. Through them, Katheren could see two strangers, obviously the police, drinking coffee at the lunch counter.

Katheren wrote, "Mr. and Mrs. George Brendan, New York City," in the space after Number Five.

She glanced at the other names:

Number One: Mr. & Mrs. Alden Beardsley, Chicago.

Number Two: Mr. & Mrs. Milton J. Smalnick, Beverly Hills, Calif.

Number Three: Nick Leeds, L. A., Calif.

Number Four: Boyd & Burnet Winter, Oyster Bay, L. I.—Ray Kemp, Stanford U., Palo Alto, Cal.

Number Six: Ruth & Rex Shanley, New York City.

Trailer Park: Mr. and Mrs. Henry Tozer and daughter Constance, Pittsburgh, Pa.

"All kinds, from all over," sighed Mrs. Migler, and took the ledger away.

Including a murderer, red-handed; though Katheren saw no virtue in going into that with Mrs. Migler.

She trudged through the mud to Number Five. Caligula wriggled his screw-tail to cheer her up. In vain. She looked in the teapot for something to warm her. Likewise in vain. The tea was cold.

Beardsley and those other men—what *could* they want with George?

Minutes ticked by heavily on her wrist-watch. She sat on the bed to take off her shoes and stockings. It seemed hardly worth the bother. She might be walking out again at any moment, firmly attached to a policeman.

No two ways about it: a murder investigation would mean checking up on all the people in the camp; checking up on the Brendans would quickly dispose of that flimsy alias; and where would they be then?

Katheren knew without being told.

## Three

What Katheren didn't know without being told was that Shanley's death would never officially become a murder case.

Grinning at her and filling his pipe, George popped the news to her as she emerged bewildered from an uneasy doze.

"Nothing to it, my dear," he said, and made himself comfortable beside her on the bed. "We have an understanding. Beardsley and I will neglect to mention the little accident on Lady Bend Hill. Nobody is to bring up the fire in Shanley's car. We all keep our mouths shut except when asked about the truck collision; and then we let rip in a convincing chorus—Shanley got stinko, Shanley made himself a beastly nuisance, Shanley drove out of here alone in his car. Isn't it beautiful?"

Katheren raised her head and rested it on one hand. She blinked at her husband and asked him, "But why?"

"Oh, we mustn't distract the police from the neat pattern of a drunk-driving accident. They might get perplexed and keep us here for days."

"Whose bright idea?"

"I don't know. Spontaneous inspiration, probably."

"I'm amazed."

"You do look a bit addled."

"Ass!"

"It all comes of hob-nobbing with the Great. Milton J. Smalnick of Hollywood linked arms with me and confided what it means to be a cinema producer. As he so neatly phrases it, he's kind of incognito just now. Traveling to Hollywood from England, where he keeps a production unit. A production unit is a luxury, I gather, like a stable of blooded horses. Milton Smalnick has his reasons for not wanting the police to raise an unnecessary fuss, like all of us. He's in a hurry. Beardsley has his financial interests, and the embarrassment of it all. Tozer—there's a chap after my own heart—simply doesn't want the police prying all night. He and a boy in bandages named Ray Kemp are thick as thieves and in it up to the neck, whatever it is. Nick Leeds thinks Least Said, Soonest Mended, particularly when dealing with accident insurance companies. And there we are, all of a mind together. Migler took twenty-five dollars and promised to help all he could."

"I suppose you know it's criminal conspiracy?"

"I do. And very welcome—under our circumstances."

"It's hushing up a murder, George. That's what it amounts to."

"An ugly word, murder. It wasn't uttered."

Katheren frowned and brooded. George regarded her inquiringly, so she confessed:

"I was thinking of poor Shanley. Three attempts. They *were* determined to get him out of the way, weren't they?"

"Of necessity. If he'd lived to sober up, he might have remembered who pushed him. Awkward for the pusher."

"I can think of so many better ways of killing a man."

"I too. The murderer probably lacked our wide experience. Shrewd fellow, though, you must admit. The

best murders always look like unavoidable accidents, and he knows it. He also profited by earlier mistakes and finished Shanley properly before the last accident."

"He did?"

"Strangled him, I think; that or bashed in his head. After which, he put the dead man behind the wheel of his car, drove out on the highway, left it in gear with the motor racing and leaped out. He probably couldn't count on the truck finishing his job so thoroughly unless he had Nick Leeds's knowledge of freight schedules—but as you say, it was a third try. Luck runs in threes."

"I liked Nick Leeds. He didn't seem the kind, any more than Tozer or those twins. Could they all be in on it together, the whole camp, I mean?"

"Not being a detective today, I wouldn't know."

"Stop grinning at me, George! I asked a perfectly serious question."

"Seriously—" and he did stop the worst of his grinning—"it's quite possible. I rather hoped you wouldn't think of it."

"Why?"

"You'll worry. Not a comforting thought for either of us, blundering innocents in a nest of murderers, is it? But we'll be out of it by morning, Katheren. Meanwhile, take courage—and due care. Accidents can happen to us, too, you know . . ."

2

They put on their best faces then, and made themselves useful. George wandered over to the store to see how the police were taking to the wool that was being

pulled over their eyes, and Katheren joined the ladies in consoling Shanley's widow.

What with the missing handbill and Woar's unsociable warning to the Beardsleys, it seemed a little late to be masquerading as ordinary tourists. Anybody or everybody might know them for what they were. However . . .

Mrs. Shanley sat propped up with pillows on the Beardsley bed. She seemed pathetic and bewildered by the tragedy and by the fuss being made of her.

The spectacular blonde in the fox fur—Cicely Smalnick, she proved to be—was coaxing the bereaved woman to drink from a cup of hot coffee held to her lips. Mae Beardsley made motherly gestures and corroborated, "Do you lots of good, Ruthy dear. You don't really know yet what a shock it's been."

Ruth Shanley's eyes, wide, staring, on the verge of hysteria, looked at nobody, saw nothing. Quite unintentionally, she was the most beautiful woman in the room. It struck Katheren forcibly that the late Rex Shanley had got far the better of the marital bargain.

But Katheren found other things to think of. Ruth's stockings were wet. Katheren slipped them off, and Constance Tozer quietly gave a hand.

"Her shoes are in the oven drying," said Connie. "I'll fix her up with my tennis sneakers."

She was the slim girl in the slacks and red waterproof Katheren had seen going into the Shanley cabin; but when asked if Mrs. Shanley might not have dry shoes of her own, Connie's eyes flicked to her mother guiltily: "Maybe, but I don't know which cabin to look in."

*That* bit of deviousness seemed to be aimed at Mrs. Tozer and not at Katheren.



Mrs. Tozer wasn't listening. An angular woman wrapped like a gift in a cellophane waterproof, she obviously knew what was best for everyone else, and got no appreciation for her pains.

"About the money," she whispered to Katheren, holding her fast with a determined hand. "Poor thing hasn't any of her own, and she doesn't know if her husband had enough on him even for the funeral and—and expenses. Wouldn't it be awful if . . ." Without stopping for breath, she raised her voice: "Ruth darling, do try and think. Car insurance? Or any, well, life insurance?"

Ruth's mouth jerked away from the coffee. In a husky, startled voice, she said, "Forty thousand dollars."

Agatha Tozer gasped. Cicely Smalnick threw her a reproving look, and quite forgot the cultured accent in snapping, "It's all right, ain't it? Mrs. Shanley, maybe you'd find it quieter over in my cabin where there ain't so many people."

Mrs. Shanley closed her eyes and dropped her head back upon the pillow.

Agatha Tozer crackled her cellophane: "If anybody thinks we're going to let the poor girl want for anything, they're mistaken!"

Which nicely expressed the general attitude towards poor, fateful Ruth.

## 3

Over the way, and unaware of being spied on, Henry Tozer leaned directly under the strong light that hung above the grocery counter. Tired shadows sloped down his whimsical features. They were no longer whimsical.

One of the two police officers sat with his back to Henry and his ear to the music from the juke box. This had been turned down to a murmur, probably in deference to the dead—since Rex Shanley's body lay stretched on the grocery counter, waiting for the undertaker.

Ray Kemp, his athlete's shoulders doubled over his knees, sat on a box before the post office wicket, watching Tozer and the door to the Migler quarters. He nodded to Tozer that it was safe, the coast clear.

Tozer lifted one of the limp hands of the dead man. He let it fall again. He deftly fingered wrists and ankles. He ran his hands up the chest to the throat, and quickly inspected the dead man's tongue.

Hazlitt Woar swung open the door in time to catch Tozer at it. He had been looking in at the window for some time. He was bored with spying.

Ray Kemp got up quickly, sat down again.

Tozer was closely examining an underclad Indian maiden on a large calendar, but the back of his short neck looked guilty.

"Cyanosis?" Woar inquired politely.

Tozer would have none of it. He stuck to his Indian maiden.

Woar, smiling pleasantly, ran his hands also over the corpse. He took pains with the wrist-watch, even unstrapping it to look at the skin beneath. He slipped back a sleeve as far as the elbow. He felt the man's silk necktie and scrutinized a very dirty neck.

"Ancient Madder, a seven-fold."

"What say?"

"Neckwear. Silk and very strong. A noose, in fact. That and the cyanosis—"

Tozer looked aghast in the direction of the policeman, who was enraptured by the music.

Woar ignored both. He ransacked the pockets. A silver cigarette case, floridly carved, inscribed "To R. S."; a union card of the American Guild of Variety Artists, made out to Rex Shanley, Hotel Astor, New York City; and an empty envelope, much scribbled over, addressed to Rex Shanley, Hotel Niblock, West Forty-third Street, New York City, and postmarked Hollywood.

Last of all, Woar bent over the plain gold wedding ring on the third finger of Shanley's left hand.

He straightened up, nodded to Tozer and suggested a walk.

"I guess so," Tozer said, and beckoned Kemp to follow them.

Woar stopped on the porch to light his pipe. He was extremely conscious of Kemp's bulk looming behind him. However good-natured, the young man could break Woar into bits if required. Woar thought it wise to say, "I'm only being helpful, you know."

Tozer looked as if he doubted it.

"Strangled?"

Tozer grunted: "How do you know?"

"Bruise marks, which may pass as a dirty neck. Cyanosis, though very slight. You loosened the tie and restored the tongue to its place. Good work, but not enough."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Brendan."

"No, of course not. Left fore-arm tattooed with hearts entwined and the name 'Sadie.' Oh, well, you can't help that. But the tie, a seven-fold tie of hand-printed silk! Would you say Shanley looks the sort to indulge in ten-dollar ties? Get rid of it, if you can."

Tozer fingered his own tie. A Christmas gift, prob-

ably, from Agatha. Ray Kemp's muscular neck went naked into a sweater.

The door of Cabin Two opened. A shaft of light and half a dozen men came out, led by a policeman, the one not in uniform. He was a burly and phlegmatic official with a habit of trying to button his double-breasted coat where a button had come off; Creeby was his name, and he constituted brains and authority combined.

They walked in single file and silent. They seemed worried.

"If you know what's good for you," Tozer advised Woar in a low voice, "you'll keep your nose clean."

"That's final," Kemp warned him as Creeby came stamping up the porch.

Then Creeby announced his ultimatum:

"Nobody leaves till I say so," and he shouldered into the store. He nudged his assistant out of the reverie brought on by music and told him, "Round up all the car keys. There's something fishy here."

Creeby turned out the corpse's pockets as Woar had done. He kept the cigarette case and the A.G.V.A. card.

"Where's his wife?"

Beardsley said, "In my cabin. She's being looked after."

Beardsley, Nick Leeds, Tozer, the lot of them, with uneasy sidelong glances at each other, followed Creeby across the court to Number One. They watched through the open door as the women looked up, startled by the invariably unwelcome intruder, the law.

"Now if you'll bring her over to the store," Creeby commanded.

"I suppose we must," said Cicely Smalnick. "Ruthy dear, get up now. It's the police."

"What does he want?"

Creeby helped Ruth to her feet. She stood a moment, looking at him anxiously.

"Come on," he said, starting towards the door. He rubbed his face wearily. "You got to identify the body. Don't try anything funny."

What inspired that admonition, nobody ever knew. Katheren heard the gasp, jumped to catch Ruth, but too late.

Her cheeks turned white and she crumpled to the floor.

## 4

The only fact they had that night was Creeby's concern about the identity of the dead man. He kept his reasons (and the keys of their cars) strictly to himself.

The fact was alarming enough by itself, however.

Tired and uncomfortable in wet clothes, Katheren felt not quite up to facing it, so George put her to bed. He gave her whisky and aspirin and a hot water bottle. He kissed her and told her to dream of brighter and better things.

He thrust his arms into his mackintosh.

"While you," she supposed, "go meandering off, seeing life in the raw or something."

"Death in the raw, rather. This cursed ring. You didn't throw it away. I have to dispose of it before we're searched, if it should come to that. I'm going to plant it on the body, where it belongs."

She hadn't quite fallen asleep when he returned, stepping quietly over Caligula who snored on the floor at the foot of the bed.

"Satisfied?" she asked without opening her eyes.

"Eminently, my dear. I satisfied myself about the necktie too."

"That's nice. Whose necktie, and how?"

"Shanley's, and by seeing it had mysteriously disappeared. Now who's to doubt his lovely, accidental corpse? Nobody. Ahhhhh . . . I could do with a sleep, my love! . . ."

The room went dark and echoed with the rain pounding on their roof.

## Four

When Katheren woke, it was with a distinct impression of somebody moving about the room.

Her husband, in fact, trying not to waken her. Also it was high morning. He had drawn the blinds to let her sleep. He had bathed, shaved, dressed, and got well along into a search for a spoon with which to measure coffee.

"Been out detecting already?"

"My dear, you're letting that come between us," he said, and kissed her good morning. "I'm making coffee. If you don't think up something better, I'll open a coffee shop for a career. I'm supposed to be rather good at coffee."

But she knew, as wives always know, that he had something on his mind; and as wives always do, she got it out of him one way or another. An emergency defense council had sat in the showers that morning, she learned.

The doctor had certified Shanley's death during the night, and the body had gone off to the undertaker's. Foul play hadn't even occurred to Creeby as a remote possibility.

However, Nick Leeds, through shocking ignorance, had volunteered to identify the body.

Worse, he had identified it as that of one Nosy Joe, dipsomaniac hitch-hiker who supported himself with odd jobs up and down the highway between Zanesville and Uniontown. This was before Nick had heard the name Shanley or been informed of Ruth's existence. Afterward, he recanted nobly and promptly, but too late; Creeby had already telephoned the report in to his headquarters.

Was Nosy Joe, vagrant, to stay dead? Was Rex Shanley, one-time master of ceremonies in a New York night club, to die now in his place? Creeby's official soul revolted, sought refuge in a spontaneous secretion of red tape, and so snarled them all.

"But Nick doesn't really believe the man was Nosy Joe, does he?"

"Between the two of us, I rather think he's sorry he ever mentioned the name," said Woar. "I bought some marmalade, but it doesn't taste in the least like marmalade. What do I do?"

"Stop tasting it with that dirty knife. There's stale egg on it. It seems to me Ruth ought to know her own husband."

"She does. She's ordered the body sent out to California for burial. But Creeby can't change the records without affidavits all round and witnesses and seals and whatall. Therefore we rot in Migler's till he's run his course."

"It's the silliest bother I ever heard of," said Kath-eren, and got up.

## 2

Silly or not, there was no escaping it.

Not only Ruth Shanley and Nick Leeds, but all of them had to testify twice over, and some of them three



times. What had Shanley said to them? What had they said to Shanley? What had Shanley said to Ruth, to Nick, to Migler, or aloud to himself?

The storm had blown over, though, and as Katheren wrote in a letter to her sister in Greenwich, *a very sunny, cheerful morning, a touch on the autumn side, and good for Caligula. He forgets his age and his breed and goes off woofing at tree squirrels, the idiot.*

Good not only for Caligula, but for everybody. The Smalnicks thawed. They couldn't do enough for Ruth; they couldn't do as much as Nick Leeds only because he attached himself to her and refused to be pried loose. The Beardsleys too wanted to be helpful.

"She's so alone," Mae told Katheren. "Everything they had, money and furniture and all, sent to California. So I said to her, you've done what you can for Rex, now you're coming with us. We'll look after you till you get on your feet."

And that was more or less the attitude of the whole camp.

"There's plenty of room for her in my Nash," said Henry Tozer, "only we're going North. It's to be one solid year on the road, fishing, hunting, seeing new places, driving on when we get tired of them—maybe you and Mr. Brendan would like to see my trailer?"

Fishing rods fitted in their own compartment in the ceiling; guns in a rattle-proof case alongside the bath. Pullman beds, stove, sink and table all vanished ingeniously into the walls. Katheren marveled at the workmanship.

"Of course, Connie helped me. Pretty curtains, aren't they? She made 'em. She's as wild about this trip as her daddy. Mrs. Tozer says she can't figure us two out—but she'll get to like it. Sold my house in Pittsburgh,

quit my job with the steel company—and I'm a free man for the first time in my life."

"And you really built this yourself?"

"Took me three years, but I put every last bit of it together with these two hands!"

He showed the hands, strong and shapely; he twinkled his eyes and smiled the whimsical smile, and altogether managed to make the night before seem an improbable bad dream.

Creeby had gone away. His assistant sunned himself in a chair tilted against one of the gas pumps. When asked, he replied that he knew nothing about anything, which seemed quite possible.

The whole camp waited, patient and uneasy. Katheren decided she might as well buy groceries and cook some lunch.

Like Napoleon awaiting the outcome of a battle, Milton Smalnick paced Migler's ramshackle porch, occasionally pausing to scowl and listen towards the telephone booth inside.

Bull-necked, jowlish, Smalnick was darkly handsome for so short a man. Inches shorter than Katheren, he was at least six inches shorter than his willowy Cicely. Except for a hard, intense gleam in his eye, he looked as unlike Katheren's preconception of a famous Hollywood producer as possible—and he displayed an unhappy, absent-minded smile of recognition to Katheren, then resumed his gloomy pacing.

The reason was Mrs. Tozer, apparently.

She had a tight grip on the sleeve of Cicely's fox fur, just inside the door. Her voice was pitched to carry beyond—to Smalnick:

". . . Not merely elocution, she's had voice training. She can read Shakespeare *beautifully*! I taught her

French myself, and ever since she was a little girl she's had to help in the kitchen and walk up and down stairs and all that with a plate balanced on her head. You can see she's got poise, can't you, Cicely?"

Cicely said, "Oh, rahther!"

"I made her the loveliest formal gown last winter. I only wish I had it here. But I tell you what I *will* do—I'll have her dance for you. Constance, dance the snowflake dance for Mrs. Smalnick, will you, dear? Here's a nickel for the phonograph."

Connie unwrapped her long legs from about a stool at the counter. She was blushing. She said, "Oh, *mother!* Be yourself, please!"

She departed into the sunlight, to watch a football soar lazily back and forth between Ray Kemp and the Winter twins.

Katheren fancied corned beef hash with the remaining eggs poached on top. Canned corned beef hash, for some reason, had to be got down from a high shelf. While Mrs. Migler went for the steps, Katheren eavesdropped.

"A screen test, you say?"

"Cahn't get a break any other way."

"Would Mr. Smalnick consider—?"

"My dear Agatha, leave that to me!"

"How much do they cost?"

"I can arrange one for about two hundred and fifty. I have friends who do favors. It would cost *you* four or five hundred in a minute, not knowing the ropes like I do . . ."

The telephone rang. Agatha sprinted for it, and by the time Smalnick had crossed the store to the booth she was able to announce, "That was long-distance, Mr.

Smalnick! She hasn't located Mr. Leckman yet at the Hollywood Plaza!"

Milton snarled ungraciously.

"My time is money," he complained to Cicely, without seeming to be aware of Agatha at all. "What do they think this is—Germany?"

"You can't do anything about it, Milton."

"Who can't? We'll see if I can't!"

The door banged after him when he stormed out. He came between Creeby's assistant and the sun. Whatever he said to that torpid underling, he started something. The underling called up Creeby. Creeby came out in a surprisingly short time, gathered up Smalnick and whisked him away towards town.

Meanwhile Agatha Tozer had buttonholed Cicely again.

She said in a voice of wistful intensity not intended for Katheren's ears, "I'd give anything, I'd give everything, to start my Connie on a career . . ."

3

Two in the afternoon: still no Creeby, still no Smalnick.

Katheren began scraping cigarette ends and crumbs of hash from their plates. George lounged at her shoulder:

"Enjoy washing up, Katheren?"

"I loathe it."

"That's the spirit. So do I. Let's do it together. This bit of travertine, I take it, is the soap?"

He pushed her aside, and with sleeves rolled up, plunged his bare forearms in the basin. Brown forearms, with long, whippy muscles on them. His quick

lean fingers flipped the dishes dexterously, rinsing them under hot water, draining them with a flick, stacking them for her to dry. He made an absorbing conjurer's trick of it.

"Don't let my wife see you doing that," said the hearty voice of Beardsley. "She'll have me doing it myself in two shakes. How are you, folks?"

He came wreathed in smiles, bearing a white flag, willing for bygones to be bygones forever. He sat on the bed and crossed his legs.

"Thinking over what you said about Shanley last night," he pontificated, "I came to this conclusion. Maybe you're right, George—halfway right. Suicide. Ever think of that?"

"On a nice day like this?"

"Ha! Yes, well—I wouldn't say anything anyhow, because it'd do Ruth out of her insurance. Married seven years to a drunk like Shanley, she deserves all she can get. The insurance man's seeing her and Nick now."

"About Nosy Joe, Rex Shanley, or both?"

"Creeby's a dope. The insurance company'll pay off on Shanley all right, no worry about that. You know what I heard? Smalnick just went into Hendrysburg to look at the body."

"Oh?"

"Maybe he knew Shanley. Could be, couldn't it? Shanley's a stage name, and Smalnick may have met him once under another name, since they both grew up in the show business. I sure hope so, anyhow. If Creeby's got to be so technical about it, I hope Smalnick identifies the body even if he didn't know Shanley. Otherwise we'll be hanging around here for weeks."

Not merely to gossip, however, had Beardsley come visiting. He was ready at last to get down to brass tacks.

He glanced sharply out the window. He lowered his voice:

"Ruth, I mean. Folks, that girl is scared green."

"Of what?"

"Well, you know how she fainted last night. That's only half of it. She's scared of being left alone, and she told Mae as much. Mae spent the night with her last night in Number Six. Did you know that?"

"No."

"Mae woke up in the night. Somebody was talking in through the window to Ruth—not knowing Mae was there, I suppose. Mae quick as a flash asked, 'Who's there?' and the talking stopped. Funny business, eh, Brendan? Ruth got pretty near hysterical, and it took a long time to quiet her again, and Mae couldn't get a word out of her about who it was or what was said."

He looked at Woar as if he expected comment.

Woar dried his hands, fished out his pipe and began filling it eagerly: "You know, Beardsley, I believe this case will—"

Katheren cleared her throat. Woar noticed, and resumed filling his pipe as if it no longer interested him very much.

"What were you going to say?" Beardsley asked.

"Nothing, really. It's all very remarkable."

"What's she afraid of, we'd like to know?"

"Or who?"

"Yes, or who. And when I say afraid, I mean *afraid*. Now the Smalnicks are regular folks; they're seeing she gets to the coast. We're willing to take her in our car too. She'll be looked after and protected all right, one way or the other, I can promise you. But who are we protecting her from?"

"Natural question. Isn't it, Katheren?"

"Very natural."

"So Mae mentioned you. She thinks you're pretty smart about digging facts out of people, and maybe you'd talk to Ruth?"

"I talk to her?"

"Don't kid me, George. You know what you pulled on us last night! Anyhow, she's coming over when she gets through with the insurance man. See what you can do for us."

He went away with that off his mind.

"I," Katheren pointed out, "am not saying anything!"

"So I observe," said George.

In a little while Nick Leeds and Cicely came across the court, helping Ruth as if she were an invalid.

Cicely made eyes at George, rested her hand on his arm and smiled intimately. Katheren loathed the woman.

Nick sat beside Ruth on the bed. He enveloped her in an aura of masculine protection.

Only a certain slight restlessness in Ruth's eyes betrayed how nervous she was. Otherwise she waited as placidly as a patient in a dentist's office—for George to produce forceps and extract her secret like a tooth.

The interview would have bogged down before it began if Katheren hadn't made tea and offered the remains of a dismal cake. That helped, and Ruth helped further by starting on her story as if she knew exactly what was expected of her.

She had married when she was nineteen. Whether she had ever been in love with Rex Shanley or not was a question that apparently hadn't arisen. Rex had brushed such finicky considerations aside.

For a time she sang with Al Whicker's dance band at a second-rate night club on the Palisades; Rex was

master of ceremonies in the same establishment, but not contented with his lot. He demanded more money—and lost his job. He drank to regain his self-assurance—and lost out on other jobs. He was, he felt, misunderstood, abused—and inevitably turned for sympathy to the other woman.

“It got so bad we couldn’t go on, so I asked him, Rex, please let’s start all over again fresh . . . And he promised he’d reform. We sold out everything we had, and bought a second-hand car to come out to California and begin a new life. Rex knew lots of big people in Hollywood. He thought he’d really get going out there. He didn’t see why he couldn’t be as big and rich as any of them. He just couldn’t be poor, it seemed . . .”

“Hence the large amount of insurance?”

“Rex always thought in big money. Forty thousand was all he could pay the first premium on.”

“But he stopped at auto camps?”

“It was getting stormy, Mr. Brendan, and—and he was drunk. I made him stop here.”

“Don’t you drive?”

“I don’t know how.”

“Did you know any of the others stopping here?”

“They—they were all strangers to me. But very kind.”

Cicely took the cue, and was kind. She put a hand reassuringly on Ruth’s shoulder. “How could anybody be anything else to her, I ask you? As for putting in here, I made Milton do the same. We don’t usually stop at these places, you know. The storm was simply *frightful!*”

“When did you put in?”

“We were not far behind the Shanleys. They were practically the first people to arrive—or did those college boys arrive before you, dear?”



Ruth couldn't remember, and Woar wasn't interested.

"Who are you afraid of, Mrs. Shanley?"

"I'm not afraid. I don't know why everybody thinks so."

"You were afraid when you knocked on my door last night, after the fire. Why?"

"I—I wasn't," and she looked helplessly at Cicely, at Nick, and out the window.

"You went to Nick Leeds's cabin. Did you find him?"

Nick said, "She didn't, so I guess I wasn't there."

"Or Beardsley?"

"I didn't find him either," said Ruth. "I only wanted to thank him for helping with the fire."

She was not, Katheren thought, a convincing liar. She sat there folding and unfolding her fingers, and making transparent efforts to hide the lively panic that jiggled in the depths of her eyes. But the mystery of Ruth's fear somehow remained secondary to the pity she evoked. Katheren felt a compelling urge to help her, to protect her, and bother the reasons why.

As did Cicely, evidently, and Nick Leeds. From a total stranger the night before, Nick had lost no time becoming a devoted big brother—or was he in love with Ruth?

After all, she *was* beautiful as well as helpless.

And Nick, as Katheren knew, was not a man to hem, haw or beat about the bush.

4

The Woars' tea party fizzled along in futility till Creeby's car arrived. From the way it drew up, from Creeby's respectful manner to Smalnick and from Smal-

nick's businesslike haste, it was obvious that the best had happened.

Everything else suddenly seemed beside the point. Like school let out or bees on rumors of a swarming, Migler's guests left off what they were doing and buzzed up to the store.

"Can we go? Can we really?"

"Is everything settled?"

"Do I get the keys to my car?"

Creeby himself hurried off immediately, but his assistant doled out the keys with maddening deliberation.

"Good-by!"

"Have a nice trip, everybody!"

Smalnick evaded Agatha Tozer who, with her reluctant daughter in tow, made valiant efforts to corner him. The Smalnick car was first to leave—a sleek, green Lagonda in all the glory of its English coachwork.

Cicely waved a lace handkerchief.

Fifteen thousand dollars' worth of exquisite machinery swept out into the highway and vanished westward. The soft tone of its exhaust quieted to silence as Milton shifted into high. The Smalnicks were well away for California.

Then the Tozer trailer heaved like a wakening camel, and the Tozers in their elderly Nash pulled out. They too waved; they too turned west.

"We think it's best this way," Mae informed Nick Leeds and the world at large as she helped Ruth into the new Chrysler. Alden came staggering down from Number Six with the Shanley luggage. George helped him stow it in the rear compartment. More farewells, more waving, and Ruth's tragic eyes looked back through the rear window as Beardsley sped away.

Nick Leeds followed them in his Mercury.

"That," said Katheren with a sigh, "is the end of that. We'll never see any of them again."

"Knock on wood."

"I did. Well, having seen enough of Migler's Mountain View to last a long time, suppose we get on our way?"

The spare was pumped up, Caligula had been walked, the luggage was loaded in the tonneau—but George Brendan Woar looked a dismal look at his bride and admitted:

"You were quite right about the handbill, darling. It's come home to roost."

"George—Good Lord!"

"That's what I say, Katheren."

She clung to his arm and murmured, "I think you'd better tell me all, if you don't mind."

"I asked for the key to the Buick of recent vintage. I asked very politely. I was told I couldn't have it. I was told we were to stay here and wait. Creeby's coming back for us."

Katheren let herself sit down on the steps of the grocery store.

She could see all of an almost deserted Migler's—lifeless save for Boyd and Burnet Winter folding down the tattered top of their Model "A" Ford touring car. Ray Kemp shouldered out of Number Four laden with bags. He barked a bandaged hand. He put the bags down. He performed a little war-dance, swearing and nursing the injured hand . . .

"George, can't we do *anything*?"

"I'm thinking," he said, and got out his pipe.

"Please think fast, George!"

## Five

After a few minutes he put his pipe in his pocket and said, "Get in the car, Katheren." He sauntered casually over to the Winter car, before she could tell him about burning holes in his pocket with lighted pipes. She snapped the leash on Caligula and climbed into the Buick. Caligula snuffled expectantly and wriggled his tail. Katheren waited.

Woar came quickly with the keys, quickly unlocked the ignition and started the motor. Before she could ask questions, he sent the car flying through residual puddles towards the highway.

Boyd and Burnet Winter waved and cried, "Good luck!"

George swerved to miss Creeby's man, flapping his arms at them and crying, "Stop!"

He swerved out on the highway, swung the wheel eastward, and accelerated in second gear. The roar of the motor drowned out the scandalized voice still crying, "Stop . . . Stop!"

"I hadn't the faintest hope of getting away with it," George told her. "I'm amazed. Utterly amazed."

"I'm out of breath a little myself."

Barely out of sight of Migler's, he braked, turned the car about in the road, and drew to a halt facing

west on the margin. The branches of the saplings brushed gently at Katheren's window. The motor ticked over quietly. In the sudden comparative silence, Woar drew out a pair of pliers and studied his watch.

Then he explained, "As a sporting gesture, I asked Boyd or Burnet to take their Ford keys back to Creeby's man and say they weren't the right set. The Winters go in for sporting gestures. Creeby's man doesn't know Ford keys from Buick keys. He fell for it like a lamb. He took back one leather key container, gave them the other—and here we are."

"How will the Winters start their car?"

"Don't look sporting gestures in the teeth, Katheren."

"I didn't know. I shan't do it again. What are we waiting for?"

"For three minutes, while Creeby's man calls up Creeby to tell him we escaped to the east. They'll notify St. Clairsville or Wheeling to stop us. When that's arranged, I'll cut Migler's telephone line and we'll be on our way to Zanesville, Columbus and all points west."

"Three minutes ought to be about up."

"Yes," he said, and climbed out with the pliers in hand. He disappeared among the saplings. When he returned, he looked very pleased with himself.

"A lovely afternoon," he said, starting the car again. "A lovely, lovely afternoon."

They passed Migler's, and the figure of Creeby's assistant ran after them for a way, shouting "Stop!" at them out of a red face. Katheren thought the exercise might, on the whole, be good for him. With the line cut, he certainly couldn't harm them.

Passing Hendrysburg, the next town west, would be ticklish. Creeby's passion for red tape might conceiv-

ably take the form of blocking the road there as well as to the east.

Hendrysburg, happily enough, was sunning its clapboard and old brick as if only the warm weather mattered—and westbound Buicks were beneath its notice. Beyond the village, Katheren took a deep breath of relief. Two and a half miles further, they stopped at a smaller village, Fairview, and acquired for a steep price a pair of Ohio license plates by way of disguise.

Then George too took a deep breath and put the top down, and drove on at loafing speed through the irregular, hilly countryside to Zanesville.

It was almost as if (unfamiliar words on signboards, new brands of beer advertised, new ways of pitching a barn roof) they really were tourists with nothing on their minds.

“How far is Columbus?”

“We should be there by five.”

“If only there’s a wire from Gaillard waiting for us,” said Katheren wistfully.

Technically, George had no legal right to be in the United States of America.

Gaillard Brady, Katheren’s cousin conveniently attached to the State Department, had pledged himself to wangle Woar a visitor’s permit or a place on the immigrant quota from Britain. The latter would entail a run up to Canada so that George could re-enter the United States with an absolutely clean nose; a pleasure, though, compared to his present existence, fleeing the wrath of a little politician named Hellenberger, whose self-esteem had been ruffled by Woar’s interference in the Princeton Junction mystery.\*

\* See *The Body That Wasn’t Uncle*, William Morrow & Company, 1939.

Otherwise, Katheren could only imagine a future as the itinerant Mrs. Woar, blown about the world by ill winds with her slightly disreputable and entirely homeless husband. Exiled from America, exiled from England, warned out of Spain, France and the Federated Malay States . . .

They cleared Zanesville, sped over the bridge across the Muskingum. Naked boys were diving from the bank. A row-boat lay in placid, dappled water beneath a tree.

The row-boat, possibly, made Katheren say, "George, you *must* take out citizenship papers. We'll rent that little Georgian house in Forest Hills. With your experience, you ought to be able to write. Would that interest you—writing?"

"Not in the least. *Memoirs of Scotland Yard*, by H. G. B. Woar? No, thanks."

Katheren fell silent. She remained so for a long way. When George noticed, she was staring hard at the horizon, a woman as remote and mysterious as ever an unworthy bridegroom found himself up against.

"I must have said the wrong thing," he concluded.

"It isn't that at all."

"What, then?"

"I," said Katheren in a nervous voice, "just realized what a narrow squeak we had. Now it's over, I'm getting scared. I also just realized that some devil deliberately told on us to Creeby, and I'm furious. I'd like to know which one of them did it."

"Since it was done to dispose of us, to keep us out of the running, we'd better thank the murderer."

"Yes. I thought of that too."

"Well?"

"Well, which one was the murderer?"

Woar made a wry face at her, but then he smiled:

"Ordinary, friendly American tourists, caught in a tourist camp in a storm, the sort we'll meet tonight and tomorrow night wherever we stop—which do you like? Henry Tozer? He doctored the symptoms of Shanley's strangulation for the benefit of the medical examiner. 'Death Ray' Kemp, All-American fullback, a fine lad—warned me in no uncertain way to keep my mouth shut about it. A jolly pair.

"The Winter twins. You heard Burnet say he was almost killed by Shanley. Do you know the peculiarly vicious, murdering wrath that comes over a man when his body's been damaged?

"Nick Leeds, who neither knew nor loved Ruth Shanley last night. This morning he knew her well and loved her ardently. Love at first sight? Have it that way, or call it the old, sordid pattern of the insurance crime—Nick in love with Ruth, rids her of an objectionable husband and provides her with a forty thousand dollar dowry.

"Smalnick? He'd like us to believe he's looking up locations for an epic film, *The Great American Way*. Do Hollywood producers usually take time for research and transcontinental motor trips? He doesn't ring true, Katheren. He asks for some research himself. An old, dishonorable relation between the eminent Milton and the ignominious Rex, a joint secret in their pasts— If I were still a detective, I'd look into that.

"Our friends the Beardsleys, for all their charm, have a curiously shy and casual attitude towards the police. You noticed? There's also the far-fetched coincidence of our little collision near Migler's, and their overwhelming fondness for you and me. They smack a bit of fish, my dear. More research!



"They've gone west, Leeds went east, the Tozers north, Kemp and the Winter twins turn off presumably for San Francisco. . . . It's a puzzle no one will ever put together. The pieces are scattered all over a fairly enormous country, some of them possibly changed into new identities and lost forever. Who killed Rex Shanley? How many angels can play ring-around-a-rosy on the head of a pin? Sorry, darling, but we'll never know."

"And probably just as well."

"Why?"

"We couldn't do anything about it if we did."

"Right," said George, with overtones of regret. Then he pointed out signs of a big city ahead. "We're coming into Bexley, we should be near Columbus. Look us up in Gouchard's, will you?"

"We turn right at the Lutheran school."

Katheren battled with Gouchard's, which flapped like a wild hawk in the wind. She pinned its pages and caged it in the glove compartment. She tidied her wind-blown hair, then her mind. The Tozers, Leeds, Ruth and the haunted look in her eyes; the Winters, Ray Kemp, Milton and Cicely Smalnick, the Beardsleys—she cleared them out to make room for the future.

She would never see any of them again.

2

Columbus, Ohio.

Woar parked on Broad Street, left Katheren in the car and went in search of a telegram from Gaillard Brady.

The early homeward rush of traffic had begun. Shoppers and office workers elbowed themselves dexterously along the sidewalk. Katheren was regarding the hub-

bub in detachment and tranquillity when—like someone whispering in her ear—the left rear tire said, “Hist!” and went flat.

Three times along the way they’d had to stop to put air in it.

Now Katheren could think of nothing brighter to do than to get out and look at it with personal loathing. Pedestrians paused, or grinned like zanies without pausing.

Katheren was still looking at it, and letting Caligula reconnoiter a lamp-post, when a familiar voice called to her. Connie Tozer. Not aware of being an unpleasant shock to anybody, she skipped through a covey of shoppers.

“Mrs. Brendan!”

“But I thought you were going up north?”

“That’s all changed,” panted Connie, frowning her hazel eyes and losing some of the freshness from her lovely face. “Look, I’m trying to let a friend know. Ray Kemp, if you should see him. We’re going to Hollywood, not to the lakes. Will you tell him?”

“If I see him.”

“He’ll be along,” said Connie. “He said he would. You’ll probably be here a little while yourself.”

Connie glanced at the tire. Katheren said yes, she probably would.

Connie hesitated, as if she felt some further explanation due. She wrinkled her faintly freckled nose. She said, “I guess I have to go now. Everything’s in an awful upset, because mother made father sell the trailer so we could go to Hollywood and start me out in a career. Honestly, Mrs. Brendan—can you tell me what I’d do with a career?”

In the light of Connie's unspoiled naturalness, Katheren could only say, "No, I can't."

"It's tragic, really it is," said Connie fiercely. Then: "Thanks so much, and have a nice trip, and so long."

Two long, lithe strides took Connie Tozer out of sight in another flush of pedestrians.

An elderly, skeletal passer-by in a pork-pie hat stopped to ask, "A flat tire, may I ask?"

"Yes. Where will I find a garage?"

"A what?"

"A garage."

"I see."

"Can you tell me?"

"I cannot. I—" and he bowed—"happen to be a stranger here myself. Good day."

"That," said Katheren to her husband as he reappeared, "was my daily exercise in Beginners' English. Now let's see what Gouchard's Guide says about flat tires in Columbus. . . ."

It said Fanley's, Main and Third. Adams 2191.

Fanley's sent a tow car, removed the Buick to their garage and got to work on it. The trouble was a leaky valve.

While waiting, Katheren read the telegram over Woar's shoulder:

NOT MUCH HOPE FOR MARY. DON'T WORRY. WIRE  
YOU INDIANAPOLIS TONIGHT. HAVE NICE TRIP AND  
REGARDS.

GAILLARD

The news was depressing, too much so for either of them to make conversation about it. Even Caligula felt the depression, and pocketed his tail.

In the cool gloom of the depths of the garage loomed

the blimp-like silvery bulk of Henry Tozer's trailer. George, smoking his pipe, led Katheren to one of its triplex windows. They looked in. The guns and the fishing rods had been removed, but nothing else.

"Like to buy it, folks?" a man who was obviously a salesman asked them.

"No, thanks."

"A steal at two thousand. Fellow made it all himself, hardly gone a hundred miles, look inside . . ."

"Sorry, no sale. How much did you give Tozer for it?"

"Can't tell you that, brother!"

"Five hundred, four hundred, three hundred?"

"Three seventy-five," said the salesman, and smirked at his own shrewdness. "Keep it to yourself, though. Tomorrow she goes on my used trailer lot—two thousand, terms, no trade, and I bet you I get it."

They strolled back to their unlucky tire. Katheren murmured, "For some reason, George, I feel as if all the tides had gone out, everywhere!"

He nodded.

He paid for the repair. Above the throb of traffic along Main came a volley of sharp reports, and the cough of a four-cylinder motor fighting for life.

"Ignition trouble," said the repairman unhappily. "This outfit gets all the grief on wheels. Change—and your receipt."

"The Winters," Katheren told her husband. "And Ray Kemp. I think they've stalled."

"Good. We'll be out of here before they come unstalled."

"Just a moment," said Katheren, and wrote *Tozers going Hollywood* on the back of the receipt.

"Give it to the biggest one," she told the repairman.

"You can just see the part of him that isn't under the hood . . ."

The backfiring resumed. The Winters' Ford leaped another desperate leap towards the garage. The repairman signaled that he understood.

The Woars slammed the Buick doors and were on their way—never to see any of the people from Migler's again.

It was still a good hope, if a little tarnished . . .

## 3

"It's one hundred seventy-two point seven miles to Indianapolis," Katheren computed on the margin of Gouchard's Guide. "Say four hours to drive if you keep it up like this. We ought to be in at a little after nine."

"A little after eight."

"You're a very good driver, George. But not that good."

"Dearest. Central time. We set our watches back an hour. Faithfully yours, H. G. B. Woar."

"I love all of you, George—except your nasty omniscience. Hold out your wrist."

She unstrapped his watch and turned the hands back. She was fastening it on again when he said, "Rex Shanley wore a wrist-watch too."

"Is that remarkable?"

"As Migler would say, 'might could be.' What would you think of a watch inscribed, 'To Rex, from Ruth'? Platinum or white gold, smallish and pretty, metal wrist-band, tiny gold face and gold hands, and Swiss."

"I doubt if I'd buy it for you."

"Good. Why?"

"It sounds decorative, but a little hard to read and a little apt to be left home in the top bureau drawer."

"Perhaps it was. Shanley had a clean brown wrist, bristling with hairs. Suggests he seldom wore it, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't blame him. I once had a metal strap—sister Maxine gave it to me—and even at pinching out my lady-like fuzz, it was remarkable. If Shanley was at all hairy—"

"He was."

"Well, that about takes care of Shanley's wrist-watch," said Katheren. "What brought it up?"

George didn't say.

For a long time they pounded westward, straight into the setting sun. Once they stopped for gas, oil and hamburgers. Otherwise the monotony of speed, rushing wind, and magnificent countryside that fled past untasted, stretched on in a repetitive dream.

They crossed the state line into Indiana. The sun vanished, and suddenly they were driving by headlights through intense darkness.

Having too lately seen a man appear in that path of light, Katheren shut her eyes.

She was, she admitted to herself, being terribly silly about it. Nevertheless nervousness, apprehension, foreboding, all climbed in and made room for themselves beside her original feeling of gloom. She prefers to forget that drive.

She does, usually, all but the sound of a bell, tolling dismally in the night. Straughn, Dunreith, Ogden . . . The name of the town has slipped her memory. What still makes ripples in her mind is an unspeakable alarm, a summons, an omen; the quick solemn strokes of an invisible bell passed by in a roar of wind.

"Eight-twenty-two," said Woar with satisfaction. They were on Washington Street, Indianapolis.

Caligula stirred and stretched. Katheren sat up, collected her hair and touched up her lips. Traffic, lights, the clang of street-cars and the cries of newsboys revived her out of the speed trance.

"I look like a hag," she told her husband. "This is a big city, isn't it? How on earth do we know we won't run into the Smalnicks or the Beardsleys?"

"Try a quiet, cheap hotel."

"How do you know *they* won't be trying a quiet, cheap hotel? I crave a soft bed, a hot bath, a marvelous dinner—"

"Fleshpots. Right. But inquire before you take a room."

They tried the Lincoln first. Katheren, winding down her window, consulted the commissionaire. Had he seen a new Chrysler with Michigan plates? He thought so. A Lagonda with British and New York plates? He didn't know what a Lagonda was, but he believed Katheren's friends would be stopping at the Lincoln. Most everybody did.

"Thanks," said Katheren. They tried the Claypool.

The coast seemed clear.

Katheren registered, arranged for the luggage and the car and Caligula, and beckoned George, who had waited in the car.

Attacked from the rear, she found herself heartily embraced by Mae Beardsley, complete with delighted twinkle and a sheaf of picture postcards, before she could throw up any sort of guard.

"Katheren darling, I can't believe my eyes! Where's George?"

"Oh, he's going—we're not stopping—"

George, Caligula and the luggage came through the door. The Buick was whisked away to the garage. Just like that.

"It's perfect," burred Mae. "I was just going to register. We've got Ruth with us. We'll all get rooms close together on the same floor, then she *will* think she's among friends, won't she? Let's ask the desk clerk . . ."

Trapped.

Making the best of it, Katheren let Mae arrange the rooms as she pleased. It was useless trying to dam that bubbling flood of affection and benevolence.

"What Katheren wants is a hot bath," Mae decided. "I'll take her and Ruth upstairs, George, and why don't you go down to the bar and find Alden? You look like you need a drink bad. Then we'll all get together and have a real nice dinner in the grill."

"How jolly," agreed George, somewhat darkly, Katheren thought. But he went off obediently towards the bar.

"He'll be surprised," Mae whispered in dampened tones suitable to the elevator cage. They were on their way up with Ruth. "I've got news to tell you, my dear—but not in front of Ruth. Wait'll you hear!"

Woar was surprised on schedule.

He found Alden Beardsley at the bar, nursing the remains of an old-fashioned. Nick Leeds, in a new brown suit, nursed another. A strained solemnity, not the result of the drinks, hung over them like a canopy.

"Scotch, no ice," Woar told the bartender. "You haven't your minds on your drinking. I thought you were on your way to Baltimore, Nick."

"Sure. I was. I called up and got a week off. I'm on my way to the coast now."

"Really?"



"My mother lives out there," and he barked this, not at Woar so much as at Beardsley.

"Two more of the same," said Beardsley. "Honestly, Nick, I don't know what to say. Think it over, my boy, think it over! Easy got into, hard got out of."

Beardsley looked extremely pontifical, Nick hunched his massive shoulders over the bar, and the canopy became stifling.

Woar refreshed himself with his drink, brought out his pipe and asked, "What's up?"

"I'm going to see Ruth out to the coast. She's going to live with my mother," Nick announced. Did George Brendan want to make anything of it?

"Good of you," said George Brendan.

Beardsley gulped half his fresh drink, which left his voice hoarse and remote:

"That's half of it. Tell him the rest!"

"I'm going to marry Ruth, if you want to know," Nick said slowly. He flattened his great hands on the bar, let them express unshakeable determination. "Some things hit you, and you've got to do them. I'm going to marry Ruth."

"What does she say about it? Scotch, no ice, if you please."

"That's still got to be worked out. She's upset. She's scared. She said no, but—she likes me, she's got no husband now, not a friend or relation in the world. What's to stop her?"

Beardsley threw his hands up in despair. He uttered a strangling sound in the back of his throat.

"All right, what's to stop us, Beardsley?"

"Ask George. He'll tell you the same thing I told you."

George, when pressed, told Nick:

"In a word, murder. Beardsley probably means that Ruth may have killed her nasty sot of a husband for his insurance. With or without help. Eh, Beardsley?"

"That hits the nail on the head," said Beardsley, and beckoned for another drink.

"She doesn't want the forty thousand."

"Disarming."

"You don't believe that, do you? Give me credit for a little sense. Look at this—she's going to sign it to-night."

He took an envelope from his pocket and passed it to Woar.

It was stamped and addressed to the Connecticut Casualty and Assurance Company, Ltd. It contained a letter waiving in legal terms all claim to the insurance of Rex Shanley of New York City, late deceased.

## 4

After the bath, an orgy of witch-hazel, then bath powder and fresh clothes—and there stood Katheren Meynard Woar herself, a new woman, moderately content with her reflection in the mirror and able to face anything. Even Gaillard Brady's worst about poor Mary.

Katheren called the telegraph office about a wire in the name of H. A. Zlitt, which was Gaillard's idea of being funny.

MARY'S HEALTH [she copied down] MAY PERMIT  
JOINING YOU ON WEST COAST. EXPECT WIRE GOOD  
NEWS ST LOUIS WITHIN DAY. CHEERS.

GAILLARD

Into George's hand, as she met him outside the bar, she managed to crumple the message without being noticed. He stopped, read it, and incautiously decided aloud, "We'll have to have champagne."

"Somebody," asked Beardsley, "die and leave you money?"

Katheren took her husband aside and told him, "No champagne, George. I think you've had enough already."

"What makes you think that?"

"Alden's wobbly, if you aren't."

"Oh, very well," and he looked discouraged.

"We've got to eat dinner with these people. Will you remember you're not a detective, George?"

"Oh, hang it all, Katheren—" and he looked crest-fallen as well. Her admonition, or something else on his mind, plunged him into one of the blackest of his wide range of moods.

No ignominy compares to unsatisfactory behavior on the part of a husband. Katheren found that out.

He stared flagrantly at Ruth all during dinner. He slumped down in his chair. He crumbled French rolls into something to throw the sparrows.

Beardsley was also difficult. He ordered more cocktails in a thickish voice. He insisted they all eat steak. Mae strengthened his tie for him and winked at Katheren and Ruth. As if to say, boys will be boys.

When Nick Leeds transparently took Ruth's reluctant hand beneath the table, Alden unfortunately groped for her other hand. Boys didn't have to be boys to that extent, and Mae let it be known.

Alden dropped his glasses in the soup. Under cover of the subsequent fishing operations, Katheren whis-

pered to her husband, "You're staring at Ruth. It's noticeable."

"Am I? I didn't know."

"Eat your steak, before we're all crumbed under."

She took his third roll from him, and he looked miserable.

He continued to stare, however, in what Katheren considered an underhand sort of way. He suddenly asked, "Did you know Sadie?"

Ruth lifted an eyebrow in what appeared to be sincere bewilderment.

"Sadie? Sadie who?"

"I hoped you'd know."

"Is she on the air, or something like that?"

"More or less, I suppose."

"I don't think I know any Sadie anywhere," she said, frowning in concentration over times and places. "I guess I don't know all the people I ought to . . ."

She smiled apologetically, Woor stared, Nick bristled, and Katheren had a nightmarish feeling that there was about to be a scene.

There was, but Beardsley brought it thumping down on the heads of that absurd dinner party by insisting over Mae's protests on more drinks. Mae's eyes left off their habitual twinkling, and flashed. Her husband was downright drunk. Like a field marshal quelling an incipient riot, she commanded black coffee and a walk in the night air for Alden's unsteady legs.

Would Nick lend a hand? Would Katheren see that Ruth took a sleeping pill and went right to bed?

Mae managed people like a veteran. Katheren found herself leaving the grill with Ruth. She looked back over her shoulder at the husband who had, for the first time in their married life, made her angry as blazes.

He stood over the untidy table, settling the bill. He was smiling his slightly one-sided smile of satisfaction. He made some observation to the waiter, who nodded and grinned appreciatively.

Whatever the cause of his odd deportment, it hadn't been alcohol. He was as cool and self-possessed as any man in the world. . . .

## 5

Have a temper if you must, but never nurse it. That was Katheren's rule to cover such emergencies.

What, then, was she rankling about?

George's fascination with Ruth. Jealousy, in that case. Good Lord!

Katheren saw that Ruth took the sedative tablets prescribed for her "nervous condition." She waited while Ruth got into bed.

George (he had long ago told her this) didn't care for exotic women. With her oblique eyes, her strange, long, narrow face, her exquisitely slender throat, Ruth resembled those portraits painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, poor man, in the years he was out of his head. Like Rossetti, Nick Leeds had every right to go silly about such a dreamlike creature. But Woar? Exotic, in any case, was the word for Ruth.

On the other hand, to hear her talk, even in the melodious and naturally husky voice that tinged what she said with mystery, pathos and poetry, was disillusioning. She talked of commonplaces: cooking, carfare, medicine cabinets. Her words came from an ordinary, docile and unassuming mind, conscious neither of her self or the stunning effect of her beauty.

With an uncomplaining, dispassionate interest in her

own tragedy, she was drowsily telling Katheren, "He never told me much about money. If he sent some out to California, he didn't say so. You'd think he'd have a hundred dollars in his pocket, anyhow, wouldn't you? He counted on selling the car out West. You can make a little money doing that, because they cost more there than in the East on account of freight. . . ."

She was a riddle in herself, thought Katheren. Possibly George was interested in her as a riddle. Very casually, very offhand, she would ask him.

Katheren switched off the lights, leaving only the lamp beside Ruth's bed. Her hand was on the knob of the door when the telephone rang.

Katheren said, "Stay in bed. I'll get it."

Ruth waved a sleepy hand, assenting. Katheren lifted the instrument and uttered a soft, "Hello."

"Been out, huh?"

The voice was a man's, hollow, contemptuous and coarse. It whispered intimately out of some inconceivable void resounding with the shuffle of passing feet, the whirr of wheels and the mutter of many tongues.

Katheren said, "Yes."

"I'm watching you all the time."

"Oh."

"This is Rex, kid. I'm still your husband. Don't forget. You know what can happen if you do. See you tomorrow, huh, Ruth?"

Katheren, when she caught her breath, asked, "Where are you now?"

Her voice gave her away. Wheels whirled louder, tongues muttered and a bell began to clang. Then the line clicked—dead.

Ruth asked no questions. Her eyes were closed, her

lips faintly smiling, her coppery hair pouring over the edge of the white pillow.

"Asleep?"

"Um."

Katheren turned out the bed light, slipped from the darkened room into the hall, and made sure Ruth's door had locked behind her.

She shuddered. Tell Ruth in the morning? It would give her a hideous fright. Tell George? He would want to investigate, even if it led into the spirit world. He found it hard enough resisting the temptation of this Shanley case as it was. Why else had he stared at Ruth?

Better not mention it at all, then.

As she slipped the key into the lock of her own door, she committed herself to a policy of minding her own business about Ruth, as before; and of cool aloofness towards George, at least for the time being. If he had gone to sleep, she wouldn't wake him. . . .

The room was lighted, but empty.

A voice came from the bath, calling, "Katheren, my angel?"

"Yes, it's Katheren."

"Come to the Fair."

He sat smiling happily in a tub full of water, and he waved a dripping hand at a cooling bucket, from which projected a bottle of champagne, unopened.

"Strew on me roses, roses," he said, and splashed in glee. "I waited for you. Bring in a glass."

"George, stop!"

"Why?"

"You're such an ass, George."

"Don't glower at me. Give me the bottle. We'll drink to Ruth Shanley, and her future happiness. You don't mind?"

"Who is Sadie? What was the idea of asking her that—"

"My hat! You're not jealous?"

"No, of course I'm not jealous. But no woman likes being made a fool of in public."

"Old proverb. My dear, Sadie was the name tattooed on Rex Shanley's fore-arm, under hearts entwined. Happy, happy ignorance. Bliss. Give me the glasses. Quick, it's popping. . . ."

When they were in bed, his arm insinuated itself beneath her head. She turned her cheek against it.

"Darling," she said, "I admire you tremendously."

"Very proper, that."

"But I'm going to lose my temper occasionally. Will you mind?"

"Definitely."

"I shall probably leave you once in a while forever."

He said, "I know, my dear. I'll always be the first to understand."



## Six

Dawn out of a misty sky, the smell of smoke from bitter factory chimneys freshly stoked, the clang of the first trolleys and the echo of early motors and feet in the street below; Indianapolis, waking up, notified Katheren through the open window.

She was startled at first not to be alone. Fresh and woozy from a soft sleep, she resented this man who had no business to be snoring at her shoulder.

This man, moreover, was the same dubious tourist guide and peddler of postcards, the same rakish ne'er-do-well who took on shady commissions and investigations for foreigners in a Spanish seaside resort, and of whom she never approved in the first place. And here she was, married to him. What could she expect?

When you came down to it, it had been a marriage of convenience, only meant to get both of them out of a scrape, a framed-up prosecution under the Mann Act. Imagine—a respectable authors' agent and a discredited Chief Inspector of Scotland Yard!

The dark head on the pillow beside her was child-like in sleep. Black hair rumpled, mustache pressed against the pillow, wry smiles and lines of care eased into deceptive innocence; and it really looked like a head you could do something with, mold, form, manage. Letting herself be thoroughly feminine while about

it, Katheren fancied him as a poet, or a sea-captain or aviator, or even a very talented modern composer.

She was bending over an elbow to kiss the head and bind the one-sided bargain when someone knocked at the door.

"Who the devil?" growled the modern composer without opening his eyes.

"I'll see," said Katheren. "Go back to sleep. You're much prettier that way."

She threw on a dressing gown, hoped for the best as far as her hair was concerned, and opened the door. It was Alden Beardsley, his wavy gray hair neatly brushed as a special reproach to her.

"How's George? Is he awake?"

"Oh, come in, Beardsley," said Woar, rubbing his eyes and clearing out of his mind the last delicious traces of a dream. "I don't want to talk to you, but I can't avoid it, I suppose. Shoot."

Alden hesitated in the doorway and leaned a shaky hand against the jamb:

"We were just getting ready to leave. I wasn't going to bother you—but we can't find Ruth."

"What do you mean, can't find her?"

"Her room's empty, her suitcase is gone and she's—gone too."

Woar leaped out of bed, then, and into his clothes. Buttoning his shirt, he had the desk clerk on the phone, asking when Ruth had gone out. Almost an hour ago. Alone? Yes. After receiving any telephone calls? Yes, there had been one, about fifteen minutes before she came downstairs—but her room hadn't answered.

"That's queer," said Beardsley. "I don't know what to do now."

Woar knew. He was doing it, with the telephone in

his lap as he tied his shoes. He called the railway station and the bus terminal.

"Not much in the way of satisfaction," he told them. Mae had come into the room too. She looked old and haggard, without her twinkle. "Beardsley, is your car here? Good. We'll have to go ourselves. Katheren, you'd better eat breakfast. . . ."

No luck at the railway station.

At the bus terminal, he found her standing where the buses came in. With her suitcase at her knee and the ticket to New York in her hand, she was waiting with her usual placid patience.

"Let me speak to her first," said Woar to the Beardsleys, and came up to Ruth's elbow before she noticed him.

"Where did you get the money?" he asked her, and took the ticket from her.

"The taxi driver hocked my bracelet."

"That bad? Is New York safer than California?"

She wept, barely puckering her great eyes, ignoring the tears on her face. She wept like a little girl.

"You aren't afraid of me, are you? Here's my handkerchief."

She shook her head and took the handkerchief.

"I'm going to help you, Ruth. Do you understand?"

A nod.

"You can't go alone. Things are rotten enough as they are. Do you want to get away from the Beardsleys?"

No answer.

"I'll take you in my car, or the Smalnicks will take you in theirs. You'll be looked after. For your own sake tell us what you're afraid of, won't you?"

She cried, "What's the use? Oh, what's the use?" and nothing more could be got out of her.

When Nick Leeds, summoned by a phone call from Alden, burst into the station and seized her in his arms, she let herself cling gratefully to his shoulder. Mae induced her to take some hot coffee from a paper cup. The sobbing stopped, she fished out a mirror and straightened her hat. In the end, dully resigned, she agreed to go with the Beardsleys in their Chrysler.

"If you aren't afraid to take me."

The ticket had to be returned and the bracelet redeemed. Nick took care of that, and Mae of Ruth. Beardsley waited to ask George privately, "What does she mean by 'afraid to take her'?"

"You don't happen to carry a revolver, do you, Beardsley?"

The bluff, genial Alden Beardsley was astonishing. He winked and drew out a .38 caliber Colt's automatic from a shoulder holster. He tossed it up and down in his hand, and put it back under his tweed jacket.

"Wouldn't be without one, not on a long trip like this."

"You're better off than I am," said Woar. "Let's hope you won't have to use it."

## 2

Katheren had the Buick packed and ready at the door of the hotel when George returned.

"What did you find out?"

"Nothing, my dear. Not even a lie."

"Ruth?"

"She bolted. Nerves drawn too thin. Now in the Beardsley fold again, however. Katheren, I'd give anything if I—"

"If you what?" When he had nothing to say, she

prompted him, "If you could get your teeth into this Shanley case?"

"It doesn't matter. What could I do, without authority or a Scotland Yard? Here, let me try."

The Buick's starter whined. The motor refused to fire.

"The garage had trouble too. They told me it must be the points."

"Rot. The points are perfect. I'll look at the carburetor."

"This is no time," said Katheren firmly, "for us to get under the hood and start looking at carburetors. I'm sure it's the points, anyhow. See?"

Katheren tried again, and luckily the motor started.

She kept the wheel driving out Washington Street towards Terre Haute. Woar, stroking Caligula's head, had assumed the slightly strained, profoundly patient smile of a husband being driven by his wife.

During her lonely breakfast, she had thought it all over about husbands and their good intentions. She grudged Ruth nothing George could do in her behalf, but this detective business *was* rearing its ugly head again most obstinately. Twice in twelve hours, at the dinner last evening and now this morning, George Brendan had become the old, moody Hazlitt Woar.

"Frankly," she told him, "you can't help yourself, can you?"

"I try, sweet Katheren!"

"We keep running into these people and their troubles, and they tempt you. The Shanley case is on your mind all the time. I can understand that."

"Which is more than I can," he said uncomfortably.

"If you won't interrupt, I'll be ever so reasonable and explain what I decided. We can't change our route

without missing Gaillard's telegrams. We can't wire him because he told us not to. But we've an early start, we'll keep up a steady speed all day and all night if we have to, and get well ahead of everybody for the rest of the trip. That's the sensible thing for us to do, isn't it?"

"Oh, rather," but there was no conviction in his voice.

"I detest nagging wives. I shan't keep bringing this up all our lives, reproaching you and making an emotional issue of it, because I fully intend us to be happy together. I'm simply not going to mention crime again."

She put on speed, having settled that matter.

The road away from it all was fast, smooth and exhilarating.

Not to the Buick, though.

By imperceptible gaggings and refusals on hills and turns, it tried to let them know what they were in for that day. Twice it stopped dead. That was near Plainfield, thirteen miles from Indianapolis. Each time it started again before Woar could get out and lift the hood.

"What ails Hilda, anyhow?"

"I'm beginning to suspect," Woar hinted, "a spot of tampering."

But that brought them back to the Shanley case again, and Katheren steadfastly refused to consider it a possibility. Even though Woar, having nursed a sports M.G. through blind staggers and colic, professed to be a decent mechanic himself, she held out for professional ministrations—and defective points.

"Besides," she said, "I can imagine what your fingernails would look like."

"According to Gouchard's," said George resignedly, "we're entering Plainfield, where 'Sater's Garage is reputed best.' "

Aside from Hilda's trouble, there were no omens of disaster. Sunlight deceptively gilded a soft morning mist and slanted down through autumnal trees. The broad peace of Indiana lay all about, even within the garage.

"Look at the points, will you?" she asked the mechanic. While he looked at the points, George thrust a stick into the gas tank, tasted the stuff he brought out, and manifested gloom.

"It isn't the points, darling," Woar broke the news to her after a conference with the mechanic, "it's sugar. Sugar in our gas tank. Luck alone took us this far. Sugar has a devilish way of gumming up internal combustion motors."

"Sugar! Who on earth would put it in our gas?"

"One of our friends, no doubt," said Woar, smiling a cucumber-in-aspic smile.

What they should have had done was a complete job, which required dismantling gas tank, fuel line, pump, strainer, carburetor, intake manifold, motor head and valves. What Katheren, in her urge to get on, prevailed on them to do was the least: cleaning the carburetor, draining the gas and replacing it with fresh. Thus Katheren made the bed they were to lie in.

However, it was too early to think of beds.

She, George and Caligula went for a walk to stretch their legs. Plainfield had a pleasant, friendly aspect, carried out in detail with another picture of Woar on a smudged handbill in the post office. Katheren bought more stamps while George good-humoredly tore it down.

"This may sound strange to you," Katheren con-

fessed, "but I'm beginning to enjoy this adventure. We seem to be getting away with it. We're a couple of unknowns. The Beardsleys probably aren't started yet, the Smalnicks must be still in bed, the Winter car will be having ignition trouble back in Ohio somewhere and the Tozers—"

"What about the Tozers?"

"I'd say they were up early and goggling at the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in Indianapolis about now. It's a famous monument."

"What's a monument, my dear, compared to a Hollywood producer?"

In George's opinion, tactfully kept to himself, the Smalnicks might well be as far as St. Louis by now, what with the Lagonda's ability to do more than a hundred miles an hour, Milton's arrogant style of driving, and the incentive of Agatha Tozer hard on his heels. The Tozers, pushing hard, could have made Plainfield last night.

And they had.

Up a side street, Woar caught a glimpse of a white lace mansion, weatherbeaten but proud with the elegance of the jig-saw Gothic era. A sign in Gothic lettering described the place as *Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, Rooms, Antiques, No Dogs*. Under the two old elms towering from the lawn stood two cars: the Nash with the Pennsylvania license, and the Winters' Model "A."

Before Katheren could take alarm, George pointed across the street in the opposite direction and suggested, "A chemist's. Open for business, too. Coffee?"

"Drug store, not chemist's, George. Coffee isn't a bad idea, though. . . ."

Besides not liking dogs any better than *Ye Cheese* and not approving of customers who came before he



had his shop cleaned out, the elderly proprietor didn't run the kind of drug store that served coffee, and never would. Coca-Cola, lemon or orange phosphate, or soda water.

The Woars had cokes. The proprietor resumed smearing his front windows with a white coating of Bon Ami.

What happened next is still a matter for debate; was it, as George says, simply the result of those cursed smeary windows, or was it, as Katheren unalterably believes, the working out of another of George's insidious little schemes?

By way of overture, Agatha Tozer's penetrating voice came through the open door: ". . . And none of that soda fountain truck, because when you eat it your complexion breaks out. I only want a bottle of wave-set for your hair. You want to look like Myrna Loy, don't you—?"

Sudden silence.

Katheren beheld Agatha in the doorway, flanked by Connie and Ray Kemp. The three beheld Katheren and George. Three pairs of eyes widened, three astonished mouths opened and remained that way.

Disconcerting, Katheren found it, to be stared at like Satan himself. She managed a smile and greeted them, "This *is* a pleasant surprise!"

Connie Tozer nodded demurely. She murmured some sort of acknowledgment.

Her mother, however, pursed her lips tightly.

Ray scowled and visibly tensed his shoulders.

Between them, they hustled Connie away. The three withdrew as if from a den of serpents.

"What have I done to them?" Katheren wondered.

"Not you," said Woar. "Me."

He went to the door. From there he could see Agatha Tozer and her daughter moving briskly down the street, apparently looking for a less contaminated drug store. Ray Kemp loped in the other direction, up the side street to the Nash, into which Henry Tozer was stowing luggage. The Winter twins sauntered down from the porch of the tourist home to join what looked like a council of war, moving formidably in the direction of the Woars.

"Not that I'm trying to get rid of you, Katheren, but—"

"Very well. Where do you want me to go?"

"On the trail of mother and daughter. If they visit the police station, use your own judgment."

Katheren saw point in that, and hurried. Unskilled in shadowing people, she decided to establish herself openly about twenty feet behind them, and stay there. When they found another drug store open and went in, she went in too. When they bought hair muck, she bought cigarettes and tooth paste.

For her pains she drew a half dozen malefic glances from Agatha. She also overheard, thanks to Agatha's piercing whispers, a good measure of intimate motherly advice:

". . . And no more fig newtons and pickle relish from now on. You're a young lady, and you have to think of your figure. . . . Not every mother and father makes sacrifices so their daughter can have a career. . . . As for boy friends, you must learn to pick and choose. Kemp . . . college boys . . . don't ever let it get serious."

Connie must have revealed a startling inclination at this juncture, for her mother halted in her tracks.

"Marriage! My child, you must be out of your head!

Please don't ever let me or your father hear you say a thing like that again!"

For a girl of eighteen or twenty, Connie had superb self-possession. She took her mother's arm, led her across the street to the window of a dry-goods shop and so changed the subject, handling a bothersome parent without letting her suspect she was being handled. Whatever the secret that linked Connie and Ray, it apparently couldn't be divulged to Agatha. . . .

At that moment, on the street corner nearest the tourist home, George completed an indolent inspection of Henry Tozer, Ray Kemp and the Winter twins, and remarked, "Well, it's a nice morning."

"Can you prove it?" said Burnet Winter, and the four men frowned solemnly at Woar.

"It's a big country, Mr. Brendan," Ray growled. "You'd think we could miss each other in it."

"In other words," said Henry, "you're hounding us. We want to know what's the game, Brendan, and whose side you're on."

"The game is investigation, and I seem to be referee. I'm a private detective named Woar," and Woar waited to see how they would take it. Each of the four in his own way was obviously taken aback. A little surprised himself, Woar drew out his pipe: "Sorry; I thought you knew."

"Insurance detective?"

"No."

"Then who are you working for?"

"Freelance, at present, with particular interest in person or persons who put sugar in my gas tank last night."

This overshot the mark. All four looked exquisitely blank. Woar duly noted the blankness, and continued:

"Otherwise, I'll gladly accept a commission. Fee, five hundred and all expenses."

Boyd Winter said, "A shake-down!"

"You won't get any money out of us, Brendan—or whatever your name is," said Henry Tozer. He was doubtfully trying to bluff it out. "And we don't want you for nothing either."

"How did you hurt your hand?" George asked Kemp. The young man thrust his bandaged hand in his pocket. "Why so eager to hush up murder? What caused your singular hatred for Shanley, Mr. Tozer? If you're criminally involved, you're all of you asking to be found out. If you're innocent, I'd be glad of an explanation. I'm reasonable, discreet, inclined to be helpful—and let's forget about the fee."

But Hazlitt Woar's disarming smile caught no fish that day. Four frowns deepened.

Henry abruptly drew from his pocket the seven-fold silk tie and the death's head ring. He forced them into Woar's hand. Woar noticed how the man trembled.

"You can't plant evidence on me, Mr. Detective! You keep what belongs to you!"

"Where did you find them?"

"Not on Shanley, in case you want to know! Right where you put 'em, in my bed in the trailer! From now on, you keep clear of us or we'll find a way to make you. Do you understand plain English?" Henry lowered his voice, "Come on, boys!"

They turned on their heels, the four of them. Angry men getting possession of their angers, they strode back to *Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese*, leaving Woar to stare at the utterly unexpected and unaccountable objects in his hand.

Nothing could have been more puzzling.

Nothing could have better tempted the inquiring mind of H. G. B. Woar.

He put the tie and ring in his pocket and went back to the garage.

## 3

Agatha Tozer and her daughter hadn't gone to the police station. Katheren thought, and she said so as she drove the Buick out into the highway again, that it was silly to suspect either of the two women of taking the handbill.

She reasoned from general appearances and the fact that neither had been in Migler's store during the minutes of its vanishing. More, she rather liked the Tozers. A kind of logic Woar called, "Warm-hearted, but inconclusive."

Both Nash and Model "A" were gone from in front of *Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese* as the Woars passed the corner. The house peered in lonely dignity through its elms like an old lady hoping for more friends to drop in.

One notable thing about the Shanley case: it never stayed in one place very long.

Another, Woar had begun to be evasive about it. He referred to the encounter with an offhand, "Oh, that? Silly misunderstanding . . ."

An indication of which way the wind would blow for the rest of the Woar honeymoon.

Katheren tightened her jaw, took a fresh grip on her purpose and stepped on the gas.

The Buick ran fitfully better, then worse.

On the outskirts of Terre Haute, they overtook the Ford, recognizable at a distance with the three broad

backs and shoulders fanning out of the narrow front seat.

"I'm going to pass them, George."

"Can you?"

"Don't be mean. Of course I can."

She opened the throttle—they were on a stretch of comparatively deserted road in the residential district—and shortened the intervening distance.

Ray Kemp, driving, caught Katheren's eye in the rear view mirror. He waved her to pass. He pulled over, out of her way.

Boyd and Burnet Winter stood up, turned, and bowed profoundly, indicating with a sweep of their arms that the whole road was hers.

Katheren gave them a polite tootle on her horn as she pulled ahead of them.

After these tokens of mutual esteem, it came as the keenest annoyance to Katheren that the Buick should gasp, balk, and suddenly slow down. By a sharp maneuver, Ray managed to swing out, and so avoid smashing the Buick's rump. The two cars ran side by side.

"Sorry," said Katheren to George.

"See if you can do it to music," shouted one of the Winters.

Ray glared, as men the world over glare at women drivers.

The Buick spat wearily, then picked up and surged ahead. The Ford fell back in its wake.

The Buick fell back and the Ford surged ahead.

As Katheren observed while both cars waited neck and neck for a traffic signal to change, "This has long ceased to be funny."

"Quite," said Woar.

"But Hilda's going to hold out till we put up for the night, or I'll know why."

After West Terre Haute, on the open road again, Hilda settled down to her usual smooth stride. The Ford fell behind. The Winter brothers felt moved to take out handkerchiefs and wave satiric farewells.

"She's much better now, thank you," Katheren gloated.

"Mind the hills, though."

"They aren't bothering her in the least."

Katheren speeded up to pass a black sedan.

It was the Nash, traveling fast.

The road climbed to a crest. Katheren waited prudently to let a sedan coming in the opposite direction go by. Then the road was clear, and she pulled out. Well ahead a small tradesman's delivery van came towards them down the grade, but slowly.

Woar's foot put on an imaginary brake. For no reason, either.

The Buick flashed past the Nash. As the cars ran abreast for a moment, Katheren could see Henry at the wheel, and Connie squeezed between him and Agatha.

It happened.

The little delivery van picked up speed, the Buick gagged, Henry took time to express outrage. His frightened white face hung in the air at Woar's elbow. Then he did the wrong thing, applied his brakes, just as Katheren applied hers.

Katheren had to swerve right to miss the van. Tozer had to swerve into the ditch to miss Katheren. Tires squealed, something scraped on something somewhere, and the delivery van cavorted in panic, but just managed to scrape past.

In a few seconds, it was all over. The delivery van

ran down the hill with an angry red face and a clenched fist sprouting out of the driver's window. Katheren drew up on the margin. But the Tozer Nash, with a scraped fender, righted itself on the road and vanished over the line into the State of Illinois as if all the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were riding on its tail.

"It really wasn't my fault," said Katheren shakily. "I'd gladly pay him for that fender. Why didn't he stop?"

"Convinced," said Woar, with inward emotion of some sort.

"Convinced of what?"

"That we meant to kill him. Oh, well. I shouldn't laugh, but—" and he laughed.

Katheren made him take the wheel after that.

Between Indiana and Missouri, the National Old Trails Route traverses the narrow end of Illinois for one hundred sixty-two miles; with any kind of luck, a trip of four hours.

It took the Woars the rest of the day.

Hilda picked up, languished, picked up and languished again, always promising to do better beyond the next town. Cars passed them with monotonous regularity; even Smalnick's car, which George supposed somewhere ahead.

Clouds covered the sky. A thin rain fell. In the farmlands west of Vandalia, a lingering dusk overtook them.

Feeding Caligula from a can, Katheren said, "Why don't we give up the struggle, George? We'll never reach St. Louis tonight."

But George, nursing the car up to fair speed, was disinclined to stop:

"What if Tozer reported you to the police?"



"For attempted murder, I suppose? Don't be silly."

"I'm not. I long for Missouri, that's all."

With or without disinclination, they stopped, and permanently, in the gloom of a dank little wood.

Katheren walked the dog, George and his flashlight delved under the hood. A car sped past, pulled up, then backed to a position parallel with the Buick.

"Trouble?" cried the hearty voice of Alden Beardsley. He was inclined to be helpful, but not to get out of his comfortable car in the growing rain.

"Sugar in the gas," said George. He put the beam of his flashlight into the Chrysler. "Where's Ruth?"

"Traveling with the Smalnicks since lunch. Sugar? What an awful trick for anybody to play," Mae lamented. "Need a lift into town?"

"No, thanks. Send a tow car."

"We'll stop at the next garage, George, don't worry!"

The Chrysler swept on up the road, and its tail lamps dwindled in the twilight, leaving the Woars in a dripping solitude. Katheren got in out of the wet. Woar tinkered. Night fell.

For half an hour, cars swished rapidly past the stranded Buick. None even hesitated. Katheren passed the time resenting them and conjuring up misfortunes for them to run into.

She was surprised when some Samaritan behind a feeble pair of headlamps chose to pull up beside them. It proved to be the Model "A," though, and not too well-intended.

Ray in a yellow slicker remained at the wheel, as non-committal as monument. Boyd and Burnet elbowed in beside Woar for a look at the dark cavity where the motor lurked.

"Carburetor?" said Boyd.

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"Dry," said Burnet.

"Not getting gas," said Boyd. "American cars, Mr. Brendan, have a little gadget around in back where you have to put the stuff in."

"Trouble happens to be in the fuel line," said Woar. "Have you a tire pump?"

"Never use the stuff," said Burnet. "What I'd do is, I'd put it all together again and give the thing a deft blow with something heavy. That's how we keep our motor in such swell condition."

"The quixotic Winters," said Boyd, "wish you God-speed, maybe tomorrow or the next day. We hate to see any man stuck, but that doesn't go for detectives. Have a nice time!"

When they had gone on, Woar put down the hood and joined Katheren.

"No use. The battery's too feeble to start her, even if she would run. Katheren, my darling, we'll sit here and grow old together, you and I."

"On milk chocolate or canned dog food? That's all there is to eat."

He munched chocolate, smoked his pipe and brooded. In that lonely wood, rain came down in gusty spatters from the trees overhead. For a long time no cars went by.

"We're well out of it now," he said at last.

"Out of what in particular?"

"The running. We who were going to leave the others far behind are left far behind ourselves. And the moral of that is—?"

"I don't know. I meant well, George, but we had bad luck."

"Sugar in your gas isn't bad luck," and he sounded unusually bitter about it. "My dear, it's been out of

our hands from the beginning. This tour is being conducted by some ingenious devil who works out his schedules far in advance. Can't you see the plan working? Beardsley, Tozer, Smalnick, the Winters, all on time, through passengers, itinerary arranged by the guide. Mr. and Mrs. Hazlitt Woar aren't included in the party, therefore motor trouble. Dash it all, I'm giving the tow car thirty minutes more, then I'll start out on foot. . . ."

That was his first open admission that his mind was on the case, and the last hypothesis he confided to her. She would have liked to ask questions, but she remembered, and suppressed them. Consequently, they sat in strained silence.

About twenty of the thirty minutes had gone by when a car entered the wood from the west.

It passed them hesitantly, turned about, and pulled close alongside. Katheren supposed it was the tow car at last.

A flashlight beam glared at them through George's window. A voice muttered, "Looks like them, all right."

Before George could open his door, the light was at his elbow, glinting on brass buttons of a uniform and the tip of an automatic.

"Hazlitt Woar," said the voice, "you're under arrest. Come on, get out."

"And my wife?"

"Bring her along," called another voice from the car.

"That, my dear," said George amiably, "is that."

And so they were taken to jail.

## Seven

Where the rest of the Shanley case spent that night remains unknown. The detective spent it on a clean but very hard cot in a cold, damp, concrete cell in the basement of the City Hall in St. Petersville, Illinois.

Katheren held herself responsible. She *had* been rather pig-headed about the Buick. It should have been properly overhauled back in Plainfield.

In this contrite frame of mind, she started a conversation with the considerate and ruddy-faced young policeman who was working over a stamp collection at his desk.

"I thought I'd go out and buy sandwiches or something for my husband, if you'll let me."

"Lady, we're not holding you at all. Only him. Wimples' across the street makes darn good sandwiches."

"Thanks. Will my husband be here long enough to need tooth-brush and razor?"

"We just sent a wire to this guy Hellenberger in Jersey. It's up to him to get in touch with the immigration people or the F.B.I. How long before we get an answer, I wouldn't know."

"I see."

St. Petersville had nothing to distinguish it from any

other small American town. It had sidewalks, sleeping inhabitants and a depressing emptiness in the rain.

Katheren walked the sidewalks and wondered what George would have thought of to do. He was taking it with such tragic cheerfulness. She couldn't let him down.

At the end of three-quarters of an hour and an exhaustive tour of the town, she returned in better spirits with food and a dozen magazines. She passed them through the bars to George.

"I took care of everything I could imagine," she told him. "We'll see how it comes out. Beardsley did leave word for the tow car, and Hilda's in a garage. She can't be fixed tonight. I told them to tow her into St. Louis right away and start a night man working."

"You're a lamb."

"Is there anything else you can think of?"

His eyes pointed out that the young policeman was listening. He said, "No. Take a room in a hotel and get some sleep."

"I'm not a bit sleepy, really," she objected, and tried to kiss him through the bars. They were cold. The salute was too symbolic.

The policeman's interest in stamps had worn limp. Katheren offered a cigarette, begged a light. He put his album in a drawer and turned the desk lamp away from her eyes:

"It's a pleasure, pulling in folks like you."

"We've been expecting it for days," she confessed, establishing a mood of pleasant intimacy. "Who gave us away?"

"Phone call. No name given."

"Somebody passing through town, I imagine?"

"Guess so. Call came in at—let's see—eleven minutes after eight."

"Man's voice, or a woman's?"

"Man."

Katheren said, "If I knew who it was, I'd go to an awful lot of trouble to see him boiled in oil."

"Sure, that's natural," said the policeman.

"Instinctive," Woar agreed from the depths of his cell. When the policeman dug out a pack of cards, however, and suggested a three-handed game of Hearts, Woar begged off.

"I'd rather read," he told them. "Escapist literature."

So Katheren taught the young man to play Russian Bank. Midnight passed, then one, then two. . . . It grew difficult to be amusing. Her eyes were heavy, her heart afraid.

At twenty after two, the phone rang. It startled Katheren out of a profound yawn.

She listened to gruff yesses, noes and say-that-agains in a state of exquisite suspense, till at last the young man hung up. Without a word, he showed her the message he had written down:

*Countermand reward. Hazlitt Woar not wanted here. Will verify by letter.*

*H. S. Hellenberger,  
Public Prosecutor*

"Ain't that somethin'?"

Katheren agreed. But would it get George out of jail, and quickly? Hiding her anxiety, she listened while he called the Chief of Police, then the railway station for a copy of the telegram to be sent round. Formalities dragged on for half an hour.

At last Woar emerged from his cell and pocketed

money and personal impedimenta taken from him when he had been booked.

"Guess we got to let you go, Mr. Woar," said the policeman with touching reluctance.

As they stepped into the street, he said, "Don't forget—boil that guy in oil when you find him!"

They earnestly shook hands on that.

The rain had stopped. Woar filled his lungs from the fresh, wet wind, and admitted a longing to stretch his legs.

"If we don't get out of this town," said Katheren, "this will probably be the last walk we'll ever take together."

## 2

Getting out of St. Petersville took little time, but a lot of money. They settled a thumping sum on the garage proprietor who had arranged for Hilda to be towed ahead, and then, rather than wait for train or bus, they had to close a ruinous deal with a taxi driver to take them to St. Louis too. With her lap full of *Caligula* and her head on her husband's shoulder, Katheren snatched sleep, till dawn lighted the sky and glazed the Mississippi River. They were crossing the municipal toll bridge into St. Louis and a fresh country—where the police might not yet have been informed about them—the State of Missouri.

They stopped first at the Twelfth Street Garage. The Buick lay disemboweled there, her tank removed, battery on the charging line, head off and valves in a rack. Several hours more, the mechanic thought, and Hilda would be fit for the struggle again.

Next the telegraph office.

Here three messages awaited Zlitt; two from Washington:

MARY UP AND AROUND. NO FURTHER CAUSE FOR WORRY. ENJOY YOUR TRIP.

GAILLARD

Then, dated twelve hours later:

NO RESPONSE TO URGENT QUERY SENT KANSAS CITY. INFORMATION VITAL TO MARY. ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

GAILLARD

And the last, from New York, had just been received:

AFTER YOUR CALL TOOK EDMUND TO TRENTON WHERE HE SENT WIRE TO POLICE AS REQUESTED AND DO HOPE IT WORKED. CONGRATULATE ME. LANDED EDMUND COMING HOME. ANNOUNCING ENGAGEMENT NOW BUYING RING TOMORROW. HOORAY.

BEA

"I don't know who Edmund is any more than you do," Katheren explained, "but Bea Cramshaw was the only person in the world I could think of with a phone beside her bed, so I called her long distance while I was waiting for Wimples' to make your sandwiches. I happened to remember Hellenberger's habits. His office is never open at night. He won't be reading that telegram from St. Petersville for another two hours, probably. So I said to myself, why not take a chance? A forged reply from Trenton would do us a lot more good than a real one. I think Edmund did a very nice job of it, everything considered. Anyhow, it worked, didn't it?"

"I love you," said George simply, and kissed her.  
"What about poor Mary?"



"We'll have to push on to Kanasas City and find out —after a few hours' sleep, a bath and a shave. That is, if you're not afraid of running into the Smalnicks or the Beardsleys in every hotel in St. Louis."

"I'd like to run into one of them," she said. "The one who's got it in for us."

"Oh, so?" and he turned a quizzical eye on her. "Does that mean you're changing your mind about a detective in the family?"

She was not having any of that. She told him, "George, you'd do well on the stage. You'd make a perfectly gorgeous ham."

## 3

Hilda hummed, Katheren drove, and George looked up the route out of St. Louis. The top had been put down, and the sun at noon shone warm upon them.

"U. S. Forty all the way. Next town, St. Charles," he told her.

Katheren remembers a wide avenue, lined by trees and, on the left, a high iron fence with park grounds beyond. At this time of day, the lifted thumbs and pious faces of the hitch-hikers drooped in the heat. St. Louis paused for an angel to pass over.

There was nothing living in sight for a moment but the little group at the side of the road. There seemed to be an altercation. At the approach of the Buick they dropped it to lean anxiously out like reeds in the wind, and offer thumbs in the universal gesture of appeal.

One of them was a boy with a bundle; the second a barrel-chested man wearing two sweaters; and the third a vision of unhappy elegance in very high heels, a silk

gown, fox fur jacket and a plumed hat. Cicely Smalnick!

Woar saw it too. He said, "My sainted aunt!"

"Stop?"

"By all means!"

Katheren brought the Buick to rest about forty or fifty feet beyond the three. In spite of her high heels, Cicely could sprint. She was fighting to displace the barrel-chested man, who had put himself in the lead. She was swinging her patent-leather suitcase against him to good advantage.

Oddly enough, she hadn't recognized the Woars at once.

When she did, she instantly abandoned the race and retreated behind a tree. Katheren backed the Buick to her, however, and Woar opened the door.

"Only room enough for the lady," said Woar to the panting faces of the men.

Cicely shrugged and surrendered. She minced from tree to Buick, bestowing her suitcase on George with an air of "Here, my good man."

Settling herself in the front seat, she gave Katheren a nod that acknowledged previous acquaintance. A faint smile of gratitude pierced the clouds of resentment against the world in general.

As the Buick picked up again, she said, "Can you fahncy the nerve? They think they own the town. 'Don't stand on our corner, go get a corner of your own!' Wouldn't that hand you a lahf?"

It occurred to Katheren that the woman was hopelessly nearsighted. That would account for her not recognizing the Buick at first glance. It also occurred to Katheren that the Woars must have been the last

people in the world Cicely had expected or desired to see.

Nevertheless, she was treating her benefactors to the faintly bored, faintly amused smile proper to the haughty and elegant Mrs. Milton Smalnick, quite as if nothing had happened.

"My deah, you drive very well, don't you?" she told Katheren. "I simply detest driving myself. You're wondering about me, aren't you? Dear friend in the show business in St. Louis, Sam Sinsabaugh, he and his wife begged me to go in their car to Kansas City. Milton had that Ruth Shanley for company, so I said yes. Fahncy this, if you can! Sam had to have his appendix out at nine o'clock this morning—and Milton already on his way, with me practically penniless! Milton *nevah* lets me take the train even without a maid and a private compahtment—and I hitch-hike! Isn't that an *experience?*"

Katheren was grateful for a husband to wink at. He winked back, very artfully, and he must have been thinking as she thought, for he said, "I imagine the hotel, or Sam's wife, or almost anyone in St. Louis would have helped you out with train fare."

"Yes. Well. That never entered my mind," said Cicely, compounding the improbability of her tale with the preposterous. She was either too lazy or too contemptuous to bother inventing a first-rate lie.

"This *is* the road to Kansas, isn't it?"

Woar assured her it was.

"The *only* road?"

"There's another by way of Alton that by-passes St. Louis entirely. It meets this road again at St. Charles."

"*Damn,*" muttered Cicely, under her breath, as if spitting out grape seeds.

"Too bad," said Woar mildly. "He probably took the by-pass."

"Who?"

"The man you were waiting for. The Winters and Ray Kemp? No, they're children comparatively, aren't they? Nick Leeds then. Why were you waiting for Nick Leeds?"

Cicely laughed a merry, derisive laugh, a hoot of sheer scorn. But Katheren believes she heard that laugh scrape bottom in a sea of horror for one brief instant. Cicely, though, was a slick piece of parlor magic. Now you see her, now you don't.

"I put my money on Nick Leeds," pursued Woar as if he were gently prying open a beautiful but stubborn box, "because the work put in on your careful hair-do, the alluring eye shadow, artistic bit of lip painting and those marvelous fingernails would be wasted on all but the solitary male."

"How observant, Mr. Brendan!"

"Why Nick Leeds? You forgot to answer my question."

"And who gave you permission to ask questions?"

"My job. I'm a private detective. Thought you knew."

"Stop," she said, and hooted, and somehow managed to rest a caressing hand on George's knee. "My dear Mr. Brendan, you're killing me!"

Woar laughed too: "I may be, at that! Electrocution for murder in Ohio, as I remember. Not that I can make an arrest myself, of course. You've the right to deal with the police, if you'd rather not talk to me."

"Nick Leeds," replied Cicely, coming down to earth but not without condescension, "is a person I barely know. I have nothing in common with him. That answers your question."

"What time did you go through St. Petersville last night?"

"We stopped there for tea. I couldn't possibly remember the time."

"Where did you stop on the road before Migler's?"

"That far back? My deah fellow, I can't think. Is there a Uniontown in Pennsylvania? We had a vile lunch, wherever it was."

"And why did you agree to stop at Migler's?"

"The storm, of course, and Milton was *so* weary, and—wait a minute! You can't do this to me, really. I'd just as soon have it out with the police. They'll have sense enough to know that Milton Smalnick of Smalnick Productions wouldn't be mixed up in any way with a fifth-rate M.C. from a cheap Jersey night club. Why, it's absurd! It comes of being nice to that poor Ruth Shanley, I suppose. Let me tell you for your own good, Mr. Brendan, that you can get yourself into a lot of trouble trying to dream up a murder out of an accident and pin it on us. Milton won't pay you hush money—he'll sue you for libel, quick as a flash. He's got a temper, I warn you."

She had told them a thing or two. She pulled her arrogance about herself, and even Katheren will admit that a woman's arrogance makes the most impenetrable defense ever confronted by a man.

Woar gave it up for the present.

4

Aside from not liking the woman on general principles, Katheren particularly did not like the hand on George's knee.

West of St. Charles they came upon placid farmland

and rolling wooded hills, with a fine clear highway between. Katheren could let the car out.

The plume in Cicely's hat writhed like a drunken hen, the marvelously perfect waves in her blonde hair whipped out in long moppy strings. The faster Katheren drove, the stronger the wind blew, and she drove as fast as she felt justified by that hand on George's knee.

After five and a half hours of this treatment, Cicely might be expected to thank the Woars and take herself off. They were in Kansas City, it was dark, and George stood at the desk of the Muhlebach with pen poised over the hotel register.

"Milton has rooms at the Phillips, the clerk says. You'll be stopping there, I suppose?"

"No, get me a room here. He can't see me looking like *this!*"

George asked for a double and a single.

Katheren looked dismally resigned. On the way to the elevator, he detained her to leeward of a ripe cluster of clubwomen and kissed her.

"My dear, I love you. Relax, and trust me, will you?"

"Till further notice," she said. Cicely waggled her willowy hips. If the woman weren't so flagrant. . . .

They were lovely rooms, Katheren thought when the bellboy flourished the open door; but adjoining, and with a communal sitting room between. Where was her honeymoon now? Where the quaint country inns, where the leisurely westward exploration she had promised herself?

"I don't suppose anybody in this dump," said Cicely, "can make a champagne cocktail?"

The bellboy, cooking under Cicely's sultry smile, thought the bartender was one of the best.

"Good," said Katheren briskly. "Three double Scotches and soda and some ice in a bowl."

"Yes, mam."

"And my champagne cocktail?"

"We're impressed," said Katheren. "You must try one, some other time."

More than that, Cicely undulated about with her drink in her hand when it came, and had to be ejected from Katheren's bedroom by means little short of physical. Katheren wished to be alone to call the telegraph office.

IMPORTANT YOU WIRE WASHINGTON CONSUL [said the telegram] FULL NAMES BOTH MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS WITH AGES OR DATES OF DECEASE. MARY HAS SEVERE HEADACHE. I TOO.

GAILLARD

Maternal grandparents? Woar would have to take care of that himself.

To insure her privacy, Katheren had shut and locked the door into the sitting room. When she threw it open, she discovered George in shirt-sleeves with his hands on Cicely's shoulders, gently shaking her.

He was saying, ". . . tell you what an idiot you are."

She was the kind of woman who could turn even an impersonal shaking into a caress. She smiled the seductive smile and murmured, "Oh, Mr. Brendan, youah hurting mel"

More than that, George looked as if he had wide experience dealing this way with this kind of woman, and Katheren regarded the idea with distaste.

She said, "I should have knocked."

She gave Woar the transcribed telegram. She picked

up his coat, vest and mackintosh, tidied them and retreated into the bedroom again.

Cicely, with a tinkling laugh, sauntered into her own room. She said, "For a detective, maybe you aren't as dumb as you ought to be!"

On that cryptic recommendation Katheren shut her own door again, isolating George in the sitting room.

He said, "Damn all," and tried his wife's door. It was locked.

He started to say something mollifying through it, to explain things into better shape—but how?

Unable to think of a decent approach, he sighed wearily and went out for a long walk instead.

## 5

That day marked the entrance of Woar's finger into the pie. He had abstained a remarkably long time, as long as his patience would stand.

Katheren was fixing her hair in front of the bathroom mirror when the bellboy knocked with a telegram. It was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. George Brendan, dated from Kansas City twenty minutes earlier.

YOUR PRESENCE REQUESTED [it said] GRILL ROOM  
HOTEL MUHLEBACH TONIGHT AT EIGHT

REX SHANLEY

When the first shock of surprise had worn off, Katheren took it for a grotesquely unpleasant joke.

She called the hotel office. Yes, they had been instructed to arrange for a party of fifteen. By whom? A Mr. Shanley had telephoned for reservations.

Had it been the same flat, unearthly voice that had talked to her in Indianapolis? Katheren shuddered. She



had tried to put it out of her mind, but she still heard it saying, "I'm watching you all the time . . ."

In a state of indefinable alarm, she had yet to decide what to do about it when a key turned in the hall door and George came in. He trailed a faint smell of fresh night air.

His coming raised another problem. Were they, after all, on speaking terms?

Married life had become terribly complicated.

She might have capitulated to the hesitant, imploring smile he gave her, if he hadn't read the telegram over her shoulder and said, "We're invited to a party! What fun!"

That was the most maddening thing about the man—his total incapacity for surprise. He only does it to annoy, she reflected; because he knows it teases.

She went into the bathroom to be aloof.

He tapped on the bathroom door:

"Are we going, my dear?"

"I don't care. If you like."

Perhaps she really didn't care; perhaps he was a beast and a lout and so on. Hazlitt Woar couldn't feel quite sure about it, and he wondered if they were spinning down the chute of one of those conjugal misunderstandings which, as a police inspector, he had always considered stupid.

The Shanley case *was* coming between them.

He cursed it, and turned out his suitcase for a suit of what he called his "Gents' Natties."

## Eight

“Rather like Old Home Week,” Cicely called it. The table for fifteen was gay with flowers and the beaming faces of Mae and Alden Beardsley, the Winter twins and Ray Kemp—early arrivals.

“Well, well, well, how are you, and how’s the little woman?” Beardsley heartily demanded of the Woars when they came. “Great dance band playing here, great! We went ahead and ordered a drink. Say, who’s idea was this party, anyway?”

The Woars didn’t know; the Winter twins and Kemp didn’t know; and during the evening all the other guests asked that question in one way or another, including Nick Leeds, who came striding in close on Cicely’s heels.

“Ruth not here yet, eh?”

Obviously not.

He reserved a place for her next himself, and sat. The Woars too, and Cicely. Katheren established herself between the twins, and was bright and chatty. To George, the brightness seemed if anything more ominous than silence. It was in his heart that night to resent Woman. . . .

“Mr. Brendan?” inquired a waiter, sprouting up at his elbow like a magician’s tree. “Mr. Smalnick wants to see you in the bar. Mr. Milton Smalnick.”

Even in Kansas City the great names of Hollywood are uttered in a breathless hush.

George excused himself, and found Milton in a spectacular plaid suit leaning his stocky chest against the bar, scowling at a bottle of Bourbon. Milton poured a whisky glassful, held it in one hand along with a stout cigar, and tossed the liquid neat down his open throat.

He scowled at Woar then, inspecting him from head to foot with undisguised contempt: "Have a drink, Brendan. I got somethin' to ask you."

His thick fingers spread two telegrams open on the bar. One was addressed to Milton Smalnick, the other to Ruth Shanley, both at the Phillips: otherwise both were copies of Woar's.

"Who's the smart guy around here? Who's trying to get this gang together? Not Ruth, because she *ain't* stayin' at the Phillips. Who sent 'em—you?"

He curled his lips round the cigar. It gave a cynical, sneering look to his swarthy face.

"Where is Ruth?"

"I got her a room, but she ups with her suitcase and leaves. Some other hotel in town, for all I know."

"And you took the invitation up merely to find out who sent it?"

"Sure. That's why I'm here."

"That's why I'm here too," said Woar, "and I incline to the opinion *you* sent them, and the first round ends a draw. Your health, Mr. Smalnick!"

George raised his glass and drank. Smalnick drew in his horns, poured another whisky and also drank, this time in a spirit of commendable civility.

"While about it, your wife's health too," Woar added. "I brought her from St. Louis with me."

"That's nice. What did she have to say?"

"About the journey—or about you?"

The flat brown eyes of Milton Smalnick became veils, curiously expressionless. Behind them, George knew, the Smalnick brain worked fast.

"I ain't interested in what she said about me, Brendan—" he puffed his cigar—"because she ain't my wife. I ain't married."

"I see," said George into his Scotch.

"Maybe you don't see, Mr. Brendan. I'm in a lousy spot. Next month some time it'll come out in the papers that I'm engaged to Carole Adreon, a girl with a name for herself, a girl I'm paying half a million a year on contract. With a picture star like that, I can't get mixed up in anything a little off. Get what I mean now?"

"I begin to."

"Well, here's the set-up. I run into Cicely in New York. She's a cousin of mine she says, she wants to come out West and get into pictures, and it's a long trip, so I tell her come along. I figure she's company. I'm so kindhearted, Mr. Brendan, I'm simple-minded. How do I know she's a cousin? She can't prove it. Only I don't think about that till we stop off to wait for the weather to clear at that auto camp—and the next thing I know there's a drunk killed and we're spending the night there and she's registered us 'Mr. and Mrs.'

"Well, we got to go through with it, naturally, and get out of there without the police raising hell with us, and that's what we do. But when I tell Cicely, 'Here's your money, go take a train,' she laughs. *She's got me right there, Mr. Brendan—and don't she know it!* Well, if I can't use reason with her, I pull a fast one. I leave her flat in St. Louis. Now what happens! She follows me here, and next thing I know she'll be asking for a

check in five figures to keep quiet, and where does it end? Tell me that—where does it end?”

With a hand on Woar's coat lapel and his head jutted forward, Smalnick breathed cigar smoke and suppressed passion into Woar's face. Having dramatized his misfortunes to the highest point, he seemed to be waiting for the audience reaction—and Woar restrained an impulse to clap. There was something marvelous about the ageless youth and cynicism of Hollywood. . . .

Milton reverted to the Bourbon bottle, and George said, “As far as I can see, it ends at the Shanley murder trial, with you dependent on Cicely for an alibi during the night in question, and Cicely dependent on you. A Smalnick Production, directed by Alfred Hitchcock.”

“I should trust that little tramp for an alibi?”

“Can't you?”

“Cicely was in and out, in and out, all night. I got to think it over very careful, Brendan. I'm in a spot. Maybe she turns out to be the killer, and she tries to frame *me* for it, how can I tell?”

“Let me know what you decide. There's another point—could you really identify Shanley's body?”

“Listen, is it likely? Between a cheap entertainer in a Jersey beer hall and a man like me, Mr. Brendan, there is a distance you got to measure in light-years. I said to myself, I'll go to the undertaker's and identify the bum just to shut up the cops, so we don't sit around that auto camp for the rest of my life. That you can understand, can't you?”

“Easily.”

“But here's the pay-off, which you don't have to believe. When I look at him dead at the undertaker's,

something hits me. I seen that face before. I think back. Shanley? Shanley? Like in a dream I remember when I was a kid playing in the streets in Brooklyn. I was a poor boy, I worked my way up from nothing, though you wouldn't think so, Brendan. And it comes to me, I used to play with this fellow, I even went to school with him maybe. The name I don't recognize, but that he could change to go into the show business, like so many do. Shanker it was then, I say to myself. Shanker? Shanley? Why, sure, it must be! My old play-mate, dead on a slab—and a lump comes in my throat. 'He's Shanley all right,' I tell the cops. I tell them from the heart, too. And that's the low-down, Brendan. That's the low-down on Rex Shanley, believe it or not, just as you like."

They had to pause to drink to the memory of the departed Shanker. Not tight yet, but a bit wanky, Smalnick had appealed to the Bourbon bottle four times. Woar felt justified therefore in getting down to business:

"Why tell me all this?"

"You're a smart guy, Brendan. I want you on my side, where you can help me."

"How?"

"Fix it up so I don't figure in your report. Fix it up so Cicely don't figure either. I don't ask who you're acting for in this schlemozzle, I only say Smalnick Productions could use a man like you at a good figure and come and see me any time in Hollywood. When it's a question of money, Milton Smalnick always pays the most."

He made a gesture of washing his hands of an unsavory mess and strode away.

H. G. B. Woar was stuck for the drinks.

Pushing back chairs and leaving dinners to cool, the crowd made one of its periodic migrations to the dance floor. George threaded a devious way in its wake.

It wasn't the music that exhilarated him; a tuning fork peculiar to himself hummed in his head, as usual when he expected developments in a case. He meant them to be final developments, too; a quick, tidy cleaning up of the mystery while its components were at hand to be questioned and fitted into place.

First he must somehow get in touch with Ruth, the key piece to the puzzle.

Presiding alone at the Shanley table over stale drinks and smoldering cigarettes and ladies' compacts sat the hulking Nick Leeds. He was reading the future in the ice-cubes of an untasted highball. The others had gone off to dance.

"Funny Ruth isn't here," he observed.

Woar said, "She wasn't asked. Her invitation strayed."

"That so?"

"If I were you, I'd find her. There's a list of hotels in the classified telephone directory. She ought to be at one of them. Nickels?"

"I've got change," said Nick, and charged like a knight at arms through a thicket of chairs.

Woar remained standing above the great noisy room, the white tables and the seething dancers, gay faces and bored faces and fatuous faces swimming into view like fish in a bait tank; and enjoyed the singular detachment meant only for night-club waiters and gods.

This intention of his had been born during the afternoon, out of a growing impatience. Have done with the

case, get on with the honeymoon before it is smashed altogether on the rocks. Detectives make poor husbands; there Katheren was right.

Fresh as a flower, Katheren danced by in Boyd Winter's arms. That particular blue serge thing with the gold-braid whatnots, and that trick of doing her hair, made George slightly giddy. He had an impulse to cut in—but she vanished.

Henry and Agatha Tozer fought into the clear. They halted, grimly waited for the music to catch up with them, then were at it again, dancing an uncompromising pump-handle style.

Protected from all the world in Ray Kemp's embrace, Connie glided through the thickest of the crowd, oblivious of everything but Ray.

Burnet Winter's partner was Mae Beardsley, and Alden seemed to have escaped. Possibly to the bar.

By craning his neck, Woar could catch glimpses of Milton Smalnick and his wife—the degraded Cicely, rather. Her new status had yet to be named. Whatever it was, they danced with professional ease and arrogance in a far corner which they had made their own, and talked earnestly, lips close to each other's ears. Milton, Woar guessed, had taken the bull by the horns.

Round and round, fox-trot and rhumba, treading the devil's own measure, there stirred the brew that killed the late Rex Shanley.

“‘The more we are together,’” Woar quoted wryly for his own benefit, “‘the merrier we'll be.’”

## 3

“Whoever's putting on the show,” Cicely said as she pulled up a chair after the dance, “knows I go for



breast of pheasant in a large way. Thanks, Mr. Shanley!"

She waved a hand at the empty chair which the waiter kept tilted against the head of the table. She was first to take the practical view that a party is a party, no matter who gives it.

The others thawed out their stiffness and suspicion gradually, as the warmth of drinks and food and conversation took effect. By nine o'clock the empty chair had been forgotten.

"Last time," said Mae, "we took the southern route—you know, New Orleans and the Old South. Nobody should miss Savannah and Charleston. . . ."

"Every two thousand miles," Alden told Henry Tozer, "is plenty often for a grease job. Take it from me . . ."

And the Winter twins threw questions about overhead cams and multiple carburation at Milton, who knew disappointingly little about the marvels of his Lagonda.

It was, Katheren thought, a field day for the avid tourist, but hard going for a person like herself. Besides, a curious uneasiness obsessed her. Her husband was up to something, she couldn't make out what.

He had a dreamy, speculative look about him; he smoked his pipe incessantly; and he slouched in his chair, often looking over his shoulder towards the door. For Nick Leeds? That young man's portion of pheasant had been taken back to the kitchens some time ago.

George straightened up and put away his pipe. He had noticed Katheren's glance.

He made a feeble effort to interest Cicely in the conversation:

"Did you stop off to visit Old Fort Necessity, Mrs.

Smalnick? General Washington fought his first engagement with the French and Indians there."

"Where was that?"

"A few miles west of Cumberland, on the road to Uniontown, as I remember," said Woar.

"A chahming spot," agreed Cicely. "We loved the Old Fort."

"Which happens to be ten miles east of Uniontown, and nowhere near Cumberland," snapped Agatha. "Henry's dragged me all through that country a hundred times."

"And we didn't stop there anyhow," said Milton, settling the matter for all time.

It only served George right, for he knew as well as Katheren how they had detoured Uniontown by way of the road through Greensburg.

What was the matter with him?

And Nick Leeds—what was the matter with *him*?

He appeared from nowhere, said nothing, dropped in his chair and drained his whisky and soda in two gulps.

The waiter hopefully brought him his food. Mae asked him if anything had gone wrong. Nick ignored her and pushed his plate away.

"My Gahd!" Cicely cried, and suddenly stood up.

"What now?"

"Count for yourself!" she replied, pointing round the table. Nick, Mae, Burnet, Agatha, Milton, Cicely herself, George, Connie, Ray, Katheren, Alden, Boyd and Henry—thirteen. Hardly sufficient reason for Cicely to recoil with horror, though.

Nevertheless, she huddled into her fur and announced, "That, I feah, is the limit! I must be going. Thank our host for me—if he ever shows up! Good night. . . ."

She swept grandly away, but a little hurriedly, as if afraid the contamination might overtake her.

In one sense, it did. Agatha murmured vague excuses and hurried out too. Some five or ten minutes later, Katheren encountered her in the ladies' room, in close consultation with Cicely, seemingly about Connie's career. Agatha was urging a tightly wadded handful of money into the other's palm:

"... For her screen test. Two hundred and fifty, count it and see. Your husband . . . so much on his mind, he can't listen to poor me! . . . Leaving it in your hands, dear Mrs. Smalnick . . ."

The two hundred fifty and Connie's future were popped into a handbag, with only the barest sign of reluctance on Cicely's part. Katheren saw her start for the elevators.

Milton, when Katheren returned to the table, made a point of explaining to her:

"She's kind of high strung, my wife is, like lots of theater people. They'd just as soon let you point a gun at 'em and pull the trigger as sit thirteen at a table. Me, I call that boloney—but why argue with a woman?"

The party was beginning to disintegrate then; to be accepted as futile and pointless joke, not worth prolonging. Making the most of it, Ray and Connie slipped away to the dance floor. Alden thought it was early, and how about a game of poker? Milton pursed his lips, considering the proposal from all sides.

George, when Katheren went off with Burnet Winter for a last dance, was deep in conspiracy with Nick Leeds. The two had moved to the head of the table, apart from the others, and George had appropriated the host's chair. Not that she was as superstitious as

Cicely, Katheren told herself; but after all, by implication it was the dead man's place. . . .

When she looked again, both George and Nick had vanished. She saw no more of them that night.

In reply to queries, the headwaiter loftily told them that the bill for the party "had been taken care of."

Katheren went to bed when Agatha took Connie home. Henry alone stuck it out, presumably waiting for the ghostly host.

He was disappointed. Shanley may have been there in spirit, but he never manifested himself. The wake was a puzzling frost.

## 4

Not for the first time in his erratic career, Hazlitt was stumped. He could blame nobody but himself. He did, savagely.

Again Ruth Shanley had disappeared.

By process of elimination, he reduced the problem to this:

No solitary female of her description had registered for a room in either the Missouri or Kansas sides of the city. Excepting on two very improbable trains, no person like her had departed that night.

She had walked out of the Hotel Phillips with suitcase in hand, refused a taxi, and vanished at twenty minutes to seven. It was a chilly autumn evening, too chilly for comfort in the parks. She had almost no money.

"She couldn't have run away," he told Nick Leeds. "She knew it was useless. I'm sure of it."

It was after eleven then. Woar's pipe left a trail of white puffs through the soft, cold river mist that began to seep through the streets. Nick lurched along at his

side with his hands in his pockets and a look of desperation on his face.

"We got to find her."

"Granted."

"We've tried about everything."

"Not quite. Sorry to say this, but we've still the hospitals and the jails."

It wasn't in either of these grim institutions that they first came upon a trace of her, though. It was in a north side police station, the third in which Woar made inquiries at great risk to his personal freedom.

The desk sergeant, with one ear to the telephone, the other open to Woar's requests, suddenly skewered Woar with a stare. For an instant, George thought his criminal profile had been identified.

"I got an attempted suicide here," the sergeant offered, "if you want that."

"Young woman?"

"Young and pretty. Might be the one you're after. Locked herself in a hotel room on Bellerophon Street."

It was illogical and the direst of last resorts, but Woar said, "We'll look at her."

"You go four blocks over," and the sergeant showed the way on a city map. "Walk fast, and you ought to be there as quick as the prowler car."

Nick could say nothing. He kept rubbing his face between white, trembling hands. He let Woar lead the way.

Hotel Bellerophon, Rooms Seventy-Five Cents to Two Dollars, smelled of mist and smoke and misery. A pallid, sullen clerk who spoke in whispers told them, "She's groaning and moaning up there. Left the light burning and got something heavy against the door. She'll make two for me this year, and I hate 'em!"

The policemen accepted Woar and Nick, permitted them upstairs with them. Nick helped with a shoulder in forcing the door. A chair had been wedged under the knob.

In the pale glare of a ceiling light, on a cheap iron bed in a room built about the time of the Civil War, Ruth lay huddled under a dirty quilt. Her brilliant coppery hair poured over her face and hid it. Nick leaned above her, gently brushed the locks into place with his fingers.

"She's all right," he tried to make the policeman believe. "She's asleep. Aren't you, Ruth?"

She moaned, and put out a hand to ward Nick off. She opened her eyes drowsily for a moment, gazed blankly up at the faces about her, then lay still again.

"Leave her alone," one of the policemen told Nick, but without expecting to be obeyed. Nick sat on the bed beside her and tucked the quilt about her. She was only half dressed. She looked like a sick child, with ink and smudges of dirt on her pale skin.

Woar seemed to be the only one who felt the need to hurry. Where ink had been spilled on the floor, he touched his finger to see if it was dry. He looked about the room, and pointed to a small pill bottle on the bare table. It was half empty.

"Phenobarbital, I think. She's been taking it for a sedative. Hot coffee, and a doctor!"

One policeman stayed with Nick and the woman while the other went downstairs to the desk to telephone. Woar accompanied him. Their shoes clattered on the zinc-covered stairs, the echoes racketed behind them.

"That her husband?"

"Intended."

"All broke up, ain't he? Don't blame him. What's the matter with her, crazy?"

"No."

"Ink on her hand, and dirt all over her. Looks crazy to me. No suicide note that I could see."

If there had been one, Woar would have been immeasurably surprised. He said nothing about that, however; or that the smudges had been bruise marks, evidence of a hideous beating.

He waited till the doctor arrived and went upstairs. Then he asked the sullen clerk, "May I see the register?"

It was grudgingly produced. Ruth Shanley's room, 409, had been signed for in a crude, masculine back-hand, and the almost illegible name might have been either Mr. and Mrs. R. Shanley, or Shanker.

"She didn't come alone?"

"That's her husband wrote that."

"When?"

"Around seven."

"How long did he stay?"

"Half, three-quarters of an hour maybe."

"Can you describe him? Tall, short, dark, fair?"

The clerk was anything but an observant man. Tall and dark, he thought, then contradicted himself, and ended no great help at all. A bulky yellow coat and a dark felt hat were the most that remained fixed in his mind.

"Well, then—friends? Visitors? Telephone calls?"

None.

Woar smoked his pipe and rested his legs on a bumpy plush sofa till the ambulance came to take Ruth away.

"Some possibility of concussion," the doctor said.

"Otherwise, only what you'd expect from a severe

mauling. She'll be in pain when she wakes, of course."

"Call it suicide?" one of the policemen asked.

"It isn't likely. The dose of sedative wasn't strong enough to kill anyone. She would have emptied the bottle. The man who beat her might have forced the drug on her to keep her quiet for a while."

"Which would make it a case of assault, don't you think?" said Woar. "The man was her divorced husband. He's made trouble before. Jealous of Mr. Leeds because he's about to marry her, and trying as I understand to force her to sign some property deeds—which accounts for the spilled ink. Poor woman! It would be better for everybody if she could be spared appearing in court or bringing a complaint. . . ."

Nick got the point, as Woar hoped he would.

Then the ambulance drove away with Nick and Ruth in it, and the prowler car after it. The doctor finished the coffee that had been brought for Ruth, smoked a cigarette with Woar, and at last took his leave.

"Can I give you a lift anywhere, Mr. Brendan?"

"No, thanks."

Woar said good night to the clerk. He stepped out into the street, silent and deserted as soon as the tail lamps of the doctor's car vanished round the corner.

He cleared his lungs of the smell of Hotel Bellerophon, turned south, and sauntered along the brick wall of the building, ornamented with shallow romanesque arches that served as sanctuaries for bits of street rubbish blown by the wind.

In one of these, and tightly wadded into a bundle, he found the yellow coat and the dark felt hat. Each had the label of a second-hand clothing shop stapled to it.



Woar ripped out one of the labels for future reference, and put the bundle where he found it.

He made himself as comfortable as possible in the recess and waited. The dingy peace of Bellerophon Street had been outraged by prowling car and ambulance that night. Not till that had been forgotten for a safe interval would Ruth's assailant dare show himself. Having drugged her to keep her from escaping, he meant to return to finish his job. Woar could be patient too.

Half an hour passed.

A woman's heels clicked on the pavement at the end of the street. They paused, walked quickly on again. The woman herself was hid in the mist. She crossed Bellerophon Street on the intersecting road without approaching the pale aura of light about the hotel entrance. The sound died away.

Then Woar heard it again at the other end of the street, and surmised that the lone walker had made a cautious circuit of the block. She was coming towards Woar now, past the arches, on her way to the lighted entrance.

She went by him without turning her head. A strong reek of scent sharpened the air.

She stopped in the light of the door to pull up her stockings and settle her fur jacket about her neck before going in, and Woar chuckled to himself.

Cicely had been sent instead.

## Nine

Katheren had preceded the poker party upstairs by two jumps of a fast elevator. To her great surprise, she discovered the Woars were giving it.

Somebody had arranged for a folding table, chairs and a tray of drinks in the sitting room. Katheren went through into her own room and locked the door. She did not like the idea at all. At least George might have warned her beforehand.

Was this to be the kind of married life she had let herself in for?

About the third time she asked herself the question, she noticed a soft tapping sound on the door to the corridor. It was Mae Beardsley:

"Am I disturbing you, dear? The boys are looking for George to start their little game."

"They might as well go ahead without him," said Katheren wearily. "Now I see my husband, now I don't."

"It's all right, isn't it? The money part, I mean? Alden's a shark at the game, and I wouldn't like gambling losses to break up our nice friendship."

"We'll hope for the best," Katheren assured her, and thanked her for the warning. The Woar budget for the rest of the trip had no provision for gambling losses—but that was George's look-out.

Mae went off to bed. "The boys" filed audibly into

the next room. Katheren, listening through the door to the masculine mumble, gathered that the party was made up of Beardsley, Smalnick, the Winter twins and Ray Kemp—who had come only to look on.

Beardsley: "Come on, sit in, Ray. Poker isn't half as risky as football."

Smalnick: "Sure, till Brendan comes, sit in."

Beardsley: "We'll keep the limit down."

Winter #1: "Penny ante is Ray's speed."

Smalnick: "Twenty, fifty, maybe a hundred thousand dollars—that's how a poker game runs in Hollywood."

Beardsley: "I've seen a few of those games myself. Don't let that scare you out, Ray."

Kemp: "Who's scared?"

All: "Now you're talking, draw up a chair, cut for deal, etc., etc."

Katheren felt a pang of regret for Ray.

When she had put out the light, opened the window and crept into bed, the pang was still with her. Everything in the world had gone a little askew. This was the way, she told herself, people fell out of love with each other. Women like Cicely, poker parties, broken promises, all the traditional little things.

What had become of that rare soul, George Woar, shy, bitter and lovable? Where was the strange creature who saw so much and said so little, who, and once she had accused him of it, never addressed even himself by his Christian name? Where was he now, that elusive suitor who wrote dry, impersonal letters with postmarks from odd corners of the earth but never an address to which she could reply?

Well, as far as she could make out, he was somewhere having a good time. This was not her idea of marriage at all.

She woke again when Woar came home.

The sky had turned an ashy gray. She felt him kiss her lightly, tickling her with his mustache. She pretended to be asleep. He stood looking down at her a moment, then went into the sitting room, where the poker game still endured. She listened, and a short while later heard the unmistakable step of Cicely mincing down the corridor towards her own room.

It seemed unarguable: the two had been out together.

To hell with him, then!

She drew the shade to keep out the dawn, and tried to return to sleep.

In the sitting room, yawning, George was having the inverse difficulty. It was hard to keep awake.

The time had come to break up. Already the Winters had departed, and Beardsley, who had most of the chips, was telling Ray Kemp, "Let's cut double or nothing, and quit. That way you get a chance."

While Milton Smalnick poured himself a straight whisky, Beardsley made his cut, showed the ten of spades.

Ray, haggard with anxiety, fingered the pack indecisively, and finally turned up the four of hearts.

"How much does that make?" he asked.

"Two hundred thirty-two dollars and fifty cents."

"Cut again?"

"We'll be at it all day if we don't stop now."

"And what if I haven't got two hundred and thirty bucks?"

"I'll take your check. Well, if you can't give me a check, your I.O.U."

Ray accepted the fountain pen from Beardsley. He wrote slowly on a piece of hotel stationery, *I.O.U. the sum of \$232.50—Raymond Kemp*. Sweat gleamed on his upper lip as he formed the letters. The tips of his fingers, protruding from the bandage he still wore on his hand, turned white.

He threw the note on the table in front of Beardsley. Without a word, he stalked out of the room.

Then Smalnick said, "I lost seven hundred. Seven fifteen, to be exact. Cut you double or nothing too."

Smalnick lost the cut, imperturbably made out his check for \$1,430, and said, "One more quick drink and I'm going to bed."

He drank and went. Beardsley licked his lips over his stack of winnings. Chips, money and negotiable papers, he raked them all into a heap in the middle of the table and beamed owlshly at them:

"Pays for my trip and a little over. Not too bad, eh, George?"

"How much in all?"

"Sixteen eighty-five fifty. What's up?"

George was writing a check. He smiled innocently at Beardsley and asked, "May I cut in too? Having missed the sport, I'll be disappointed if I don't contribute. Double or nothing. Two cuts out of three. What do you say?"

He said nothing. After a sharp glance at Woar, he nodded his head, a little reluctantly.

Woar shuffled, and slapped the pack in front of Beardsley. He drew a seven, Woar a king.

Beardsley shuffled, slid the pack to Woar, who drew a trey. Beardsley got an ace.

Woar's turn to shuffle. The strained silence tightened down on them. Beardsley fingered the pack hesitantly

before he chose his cut—a seven. Woar quickly and casually turned up a ten.

“Thanks,” said Woar, gathering up the checks.

“So I win a fat profit from the boys, and you win it from me,” Beardsley mused. “I didn’t expect that. In fact, I’m wondering if you have any right to keep it?”

“The ethics,” said Woar, “become involved. Must we go into that? I plied the trade myself in Singapore, in leaner years. I see you alternate one tapered pack, one doped. Watch, I’ll draw the aces—a narrow ace, a shiny corner for another ace, an ace, an ace. . . . What dainty doctoring! Your wife’s? I’ve only admiration for her art.”

Beardsley raised himself indignantly to his feet:

“Be careful, Brendan! If you mean I’m a crooked—”

“I mean you are. Is that clear?”

“Just say that again!”

“With trimmings, if you like. You travel about the country cheating at cards, and your professional scruples are low enough to let you victimize college men. That is low! For one of your calling, you’re cheap and unenterprising, but thanks apparently to Mae’s shrewd management, you’re prospering of late—”

Alden jumped. A silly thing to do. Woar used a deceptive left, reserving all the business for his right to a surprising place. Alden suddenly sat down and made violent retching noises in his throat.

Woar slipped the Beardsley automatic in his pocket.

“Sorry about your stomach. I didn’t want to mark your face.”

“Aghh!”

“And if you’re very good, I’ll let you have the weapon back. Feeling better? Then the time has come for us to be reasonable.”

## 3

George opened the window. Dawn streamed in and a cool wind that blew away the reek of tobacco smoke. Beardsley's once cheerful face had sagged into heavy jowls. His pinkish skin had turned a morose, sickly gray. But the air revived him a little, enough to accept the stiff eye-opener Woar made for him.

"I have to make up my mind, Beardsley. You're either the most naïve card-sharp I ever knew, or the boldest and coldest of murderers. You know I'm a detective, don't you?"

"Is that so?"

"Please! An indifferent liar can be damned tedious. You may not know, however, that I'm a detective named Woar who demonstrated the innocence of a man being held on a murder indictment to satisfy the political ambitions of a certain public prosecutor in New Jersey. I thwarted the political ambitions. Not a deportable offense in itself, but the prosecutor's a vindictive chap—and powerful. I'm wanted for deportation. I don't intend to be caught. You understand?"

Beardsley nodded.

"Good! Because if I'm caught, you're sunk. I'll tell the police every blessed thing I know about you and Mae."

When Beardsley had digested the ultimatum, Woar went on to the next point:

"Last night someone disguised in a yellow camel's hair coat waylaid Ruth Shanley outside the Hotel Phillips. He induced her to go to a disreputable lodging house with him. He tried to make her sign a paper, probably the claim or the disclaimer to her husband's

insurance. That attempt involved physical torture.”

“Damn it all! Do you think I’d do a thing like that?”

“Quite! The moral leap from crooked gambling to an insurance fraud is no great strain; the efforts of you and Mae to hush Shanley’s murder are revealing; and Ruth’s inseparable friend and protector after the criminal fact was—you.”

Beardsley squirmed pitifully and stammered, “I—I only tried to be kind. I couldn’t get mixed up with the law. I wouldn’t hurt a soul. Good God, Brendan—*why* do you pick on me?”

“Not for meaty disclosures, certainly,” said Woar. “Do the Winter twins play poker well?”

“Too well. Why, they filled hands I—”

“No doubt. They dance well, too. And you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Specifically, how many times did you dance with Cicely last evening?”

“Twice. No, three times, I guess it was.”

“Smalnick—would you call him a two-fisted drinker?”

“He’s Superman.”

“But is he Smalnick? Is he really looking for his precious cinema locations? Would he drive his own car to California? Will this check he made out to you be honored at the bank?”

Obviously never having considered otherwise, Beardsley scratched his white curls:

“You don’t give a man much time to think, do you? I only know that foreign car he drives is registered in the name of Smalnick, and—well, the way it stands out like a sore thumb, it couldn’t be stolen. And he’d be an awful fool to call himself Smalnick if he wasn’t. It wouldn’t take long to check up.”

Woar said, “I expect an answer by noon.”



He stood gazing down at Beardsley and sucking on his cold pipe in speculation till his victim began squirming again.

"I'd just as soon be pinched and get it over with," Beardsley complained. "Can't you make up your mind?"

"No."

"And I'm supposed to—?"

Woar tossed the automatic in his lap:

"Keep your mouth shut, and go on with your trip. I expect to see you in Hutchinson or Dodge City. If not, I'll let the police cope with your disappearance. Along the way, you might usefully meditate: Any further harm to Ruth Shanley, and I'll spill the beans at once. And I warned Cicely last night, further informing on me, as at Migler's and St. Petersville, can be counted on to produce the same result. Help, though, will be duly appreciated. I think we know where we stand now, Beardsley."

None too sure, Beardsley let himself gladly be pushed out the door. He fled to tell the worst to Mae.

## 4

Katheren roused herself at seven.

George's bed had not been slept in. Faint splashing sounds, however, came from the bath. She found him sitting in the tub, a somewhat owl-eyed fawn and battered from lack of sleep, but obviously pleased at the sight of her.

"Hello, Katheren!"

"Good morning, George."

"Oh, good!"

"What?"

"I wasn't sure we'd be on speaking terms. We are. I said, 'Good.'"

"I seem to have some of your clean shirts in my bag, so I brought you one. Breakfast?"

Cool, aloof and briskly businesslike was the order of the day for Katheren. Woar noticed, and squeezed bubbles out of his bath sponge in disheartenment. An outright quarrel could be fought to a quick reconciliation, but these unruffled calms, elusive and disturbing, might endure for a month.

Woar said, "Oh, order me some eggs, anything. I don't care."

From here on, the honeymoon encountered polar conditions of increasing severity.

For instance, Cicely. With barely any sleep to her credit, she joined them at breakfast. Whatever agreement she had reached with Milton Smalnick, it failed to include transportation, for she asked, "If I ain't inflicting myself, will you take me with you today?"

Katheren made a face. "On what was once ironically termed our honeymoon? We'll be glad to have you. We enjoy your company."

Sincerity or sarcasm, Katheren's level voice gave no clue. Cicely chose to take it as sincerity.

"Thanks. See you down in the lobby."

When she had ankled away trailing clouds of cigarette smoke, Katheren finished her coffee and started to pack with unapproachable vehemence. George decided against reasoning with her. Still in his dressing gown, he lighted his pipe and settled down with the telephone in the sitting room.

"From now on," Nick Leeds's peremptory bark assured him, "I'm looking after Ruth—and nobody else!

Beat up, that's what she was—like you'd beat up a man with your fists."

"Will she tell who did it?"

"You know how she is, Brendan. You can't get anything out of her."

"The police?"

"They'll run the guy in for wife-beating, if they ever find him. That story of yours worked all right. But we're not waiting for the police to get off their tails, we're leaving as soon as the hospital lets her out, which ought to be about eleven or twelve o'clock. . . ."

That was at eight.

The Beardsleys had checked out of the Muhlebach and Smalnick out of the Phillips. The Tozer family, the Winters and Ray Kemp had left the Homelike Auto Camp, on the eastern edge of Kansas City near the junction of Raytown and Sniabar Roads, at twenty to seven. So far, so good.

But criminal detection was more than a simple matter of telephoning. Woar faced the next step, a piece of tiresome routine: finding a taxi that had stopped to let one of its two passengers buy a second-hand hat and yellow camel's hair coat. That might take a morning, or the whole day.

He never started on it, however.

Katheren appeared from her bedroom and asked, "Did you hear the knock on my door? By the way, you ought to get dressed. You look silly without trousers."

"Who was it?"

"The house detective and a policeman, looking for Hazlitt Woar, alias George Brendan. I sent them to Cicely's room. You've got a minute, possibly two, if you want to run for it."

"Blast. Katheren—"

"Now they're knocking on Cicely's door."

"Listen. Get the luggage in the car. Pick up Cicely and Caligula. Pay the hotel bill as quick as you can. Then drive west on Sixth Street till you cross the state line into Kansas."

"And if they won't let me?"

"Rot. They can't stop you if they can't catch up with you."

George locked the connecting door from Cicely's room. Several seconds later, a hand was rudely rattling the knob.

"Either this is good-by, my dearest, till we meet on some far foreign soil, or I'll manage to get a street-car into Kansas and see you in half an hour. In any case, I love you."

He kissed her and slipped out into the corridor, still buttoning his trousers. The house detective was fitting a pass key into the lock of the connecting door. The way to the elevators lay clear.

Katheren felt the thaw coming on. She had half a mind to shout after George that she loved him too, in spite of everything, but it was too late. The house detective impaled her with a disillusioned stare.

5

She cooked him up a tale about being Cicely Smalnick, a bare acquaintance of the vanished Woars. It went down well enough for the moment. The moment was enough for Katheren, who stood on no ceremony.

She bullied the management about the luggage, and the garage about the Buick. Both were brought together outside the hotel, and a staggering bill settled into the bargain, in slightly more than seven and a half minutes,

during which time the detectives were apparently busy elsewhere.

Or were they?

Cicely had an inclination to ask questions, half in and half out of the Buick, but Katheren yanked her into the seat, tempered the violence with a throw-away smile, and departed.

"Would you say we were being followed?" she asked at the end of two blocks.

"How should I know?"

"By close observation of that coupé in back of us. I'm going to turn in at this filling station for a look at the oil. See what happens."

The coupé parked and waited for them.

"Well, if they want to make a point of it," said Katheren determinedly, and she drove on, turning corners at random till she came to a hotel large enough to sport a commissioner in uniform. For all she knew, it might have been the Muhlebach again.

She stopped and asked him, "Is there a side entrance to this place?"

"Yes, mam. That corner, turn right, and you can't miss it."

She folded and inserted into his hand a bill which she hoped was no larger than a five. She was keeping one fearful eye on the coupé that had again stopped behind them.

"I wonder," she said to the commissioner, "if you'd drive my car around to the side entrance for me? We've been annoyed for miles by the men in that car following us. We'd like to lose them."

"Why, yes, mam . . ."

And as Katheren, Cicely and Caligula went into the lobby and the Buick disappeared round the corner,

there was perceptible confusion in the coupé. Katheren hoped they'd follow her. The hope was partially gratified. One man got out to pursue them. The other stayed behind the wheel.

"Now," said Katheren, "we forget to be ladylike, if you don't mind."

They had a fair start. They ran. Their passage through the lobby caused well-bred stares and in extreme cases a raising of eyebrows, but they found the way to the side entrance before pursuit could get its stride. The detective was still out of sight when they met the Buick.

Hilda gave her all. The get-away, from any point of view, was magnificent. No trace of a black coupé survived it.

When Katheren had settled down to fast and intricate driving through the westbound traffic on Sixth, Cicely relaxed enough to straighten her hat.

"Now watch for George."

"How can I watch for anything with my hair blowing in my eyes? What is this, something Elsa Maxwell invented?"

They crossed the inter-city viaduct into the safety of Kansas. Katheren pulled up on State Avenue, giving Cicely's hair its needed reprieve.

"Not exactly palsy-walsy," said Cicely, "with the law, you people, are you?"

"We're notorious international jewel thieves," Katheren told her. "Mull it over while I find my husband."

But she didn't find him.

She walked the street, she gazed into opaque waters of the Kansas River, she loitered by a lamp post. She told Caligula and herself, "He'll be along almost any minute now. He had to take a street-car, you know."

Kansas City, Kansas, is a far cry from Kansas City, Missouri. More than a river divides them.

More than a river divided the Woars, but if he had shown up then, she would have forgiven him everything.

Half an hour passed. An hour. Two hours . . .

## Ten

Just as the lunch hour rush began and her hopes dwindled to a crumb, he swung jauntily down from a bus. He wore no traces of disaster, but instead a broad grin. A shy, conciliating grin; nevertheless, a grin.

"Waiting long, my dear?"

"Practically three hours."

"Accosted by any passing gentlemen?"

"After three hours, I'm not in the mood for banter."

"Naturally," and he hesitated. The hesitation seemed guilty to Katheren. "I came as quick as I could, my dear—but that blasted informer has been polishing his technique. I asked Nick Leeds to inquire. Apparently the police know our itinerary as far ahead as Los Angeles, so—"

"Is that where you were—with Nick Leeds?"

"Oh, I did drop in at the hospital. Only for a moment. He and Ruth were leaving. What really delayed me was a development. Quite interesting. They're my weakness, you know—developments."

Her first flush of relief at the sight of him had subsided. Now, as a result of having worried about him in vain, and learning that his desperate flight for liberty had really been a dawdle over footling "developments," she was overwhelmingly irritated.



"I'm not interested in the Shanley case, George. I don't want to hear about it. I never want to hear about it in the future. That's definite, I think."

"Damn it all, my dear—"

"And I don't particularly want to be called your 'dear,' everything considered. Cicely's room was on our hotel bill. Are you formally supporting her now?"

"Oh, good Lord!"

"And the rather futile party in the Grill last night—that was on our bill too. It came to more than a hundred dollars. We're practically broke. Those invitations, I gather, were more of your detective work?"

"All right, I'll confess to that—but do listen to reason, Katheren! I wanted to have done with it for our own sake—"

"George, please! I'm not interested in the Shanley case. Can't you understand that?"

Since two small children had stopped to listen to the quarrel, George shut up. They walked on to the Buick then, tacitly agreeing to an armistice.

Katheren drove, and drove fast. Unfortunately, Cicely ogled and snuggled. Katheren drove faster. Poor Cicely! Even her automatic efforts to snuggle further out of the wind were unfortunate.

George worked out a new route to avoid possible police traps in Olathe and Ottawa; by way of Topeka (on the road to Denver) and south to Emporia, then via the New Santa Fé Trail to Hutchinson and Dodge City, their original destination.

Katheren asked, "Do we meet the suspects there?"

"I wasn't thinking of them particularly."

"Of course you weren't!"

"I was thinking of word from Gaillard."

"Oh, I see," and Katheren left it at that.

There were traces of recent rain along the road margins; bright puddles in the dark earth, and deep ruts. The road itself was none too smooth. The social going was even rougher. For the first five miles, Cicely tried to lighten the journey with sprightly chatter, a monologue showing off her exhaustive reading in the field of gossip columns, but even she had to give up in the face of that bleak silence.

Pride is strong, individual sensibilities unyielding. Marriage in the middle years can wreck on either.

Not only did the chances of saving the Woar romance look small, but little seemed left to save just then. Divorce loomed near by, around the next corner, waiting to hear its name mentioned. Incompatibility.

In other circumstances, the domestic difficulties of a criminal expert could be discounted, their effect on the outcome of a case ignored as slight. However, it was what Katheren didn't know that led to the final useless catastrophe, the horrible bloodletting in the wastes of a California desert.

What she didn't know was the content of a telegram in George's pocket:

GEORGE BRENDAN

HOTEL MUHLEBACH

KANSAS CITY, MO.

PERSONALLY ASSURE YOU I AM NOT EN ROUTE IN  
LAGONDA. IF LEFTY RESPONSIBLE HAVE HIM TELE-  
PHONE ME SANTA BARBARA TWELVE NOON SUNDAY.  
ACCEPTING NO LIABILITY FOR HIS COMMITMENTS.

MILTON SMALNICK

## 2

In Kansas, the paved road is called "the slab."

From the slab, eastern Kansas looked like a new country to the three in the Buick. The wind felt sharper, hotter to them. The houses and the towns seemed to rise starkly from the fields, without belonging to the land or being comfortable in it.

The lanes that cut off at right angles from the slab were ratty open wounds in the earth. The other cars they passed had an unfamiliar look; no longer sleekly polished and urbane, but stained with mud and battered from hard work.

It was the edge of the West.

Beyond Tonganoxie, Katheren was moved to inquire:

"George, are we getting a flat tire?"

"Don't let your fancy run away with you."

"Nevertheless, do you mind looking?"

Woar craned his neck out and reported, "We are. Carry on to a filling station if you can."

At a bend in the road, beneath a clump of cottonwoods on the shoulder of a knoll, stood a ramshackle unpainted house with a gasoline pump standing before its door.

A lean youth, solemnly chewing and regarding them with apathy, unfolded his brown fore-arms and came to the side of the car.

"Can you fix a tire for us?"

He nodded glumly. They got out and tramped into the house, where an incredibly old and gnarled version of the young man outside stirred himself from a plush rocking chair and sold them bottled soda and a box of fig newtons.

"Come from East?"

"We're from N'Yawk," said Cicely in that peculiar lofty insolence that city people trot out for the yokelry.

"Come through rain?"

"Not a drop," said Katheren.

"Goin' West?"

"We'd like to make Dodge City tonight," Woar told him.

The old man screwed his lips tight to hold down his false teeth, and let himself laugh merrily.

"Ain't figurin' on cuttin' down from Topeka to Emporia, be you? 'Cause if you be, you better trade that big car o' yours for a rowboat. Ha!"

This made the proper impression. The three strangers stopped munching on their crackers and gave him all their attention, so he told them:

"Plenty o' weather down southwest lately. Havin' trouble with the Osage and the Neosho. Maybe you can get through, maybe not. None o' my business, son, but you're sure crazy if you try."

Woar noticed the bit of a pipe projecting from a pocket of the old man's blue denim jacket. He tactfully offered his pouch. After some sniffing and squinting at the tobacco in it, the civility was accepted with gratitude. Only after matches had been struck did Woar ask, "What can we do to reach Dodge City tonight? It's rather important to us."

"Son, I lived sixty-five years in Kansas, and I ain't been to Dodge City once. St. Joseph's my home. Missouri born, I am. Ask the boy about Dodge City, he's got itchin' feet like everybody today. World's gone crazy! . . .

"I'm a lot older'n most people, so I'm tellin' you somethin' free. Goin' West, are you? Important, is it?

Maybe, maybe not. What I'm tellin' you is, give her leather, son! More rain's acomin', rivers'll be swellin' up fast, west country's due for God's awfulest duckin' in many a year. How'd I know? Got it in my bones, that's how. The boy says I'm an old man, I don't shut my mouth tight enough to hold. Maybe, maybe not. He can think so, you can think so too. But if I was you, son, an' I was goin' West, I'd get goin' quick, and I'd go, an' I'd go, an' I'd go. . . ."

He clacked his teeth prophetically and rocked in his plush chair.

Cicely, unimpressed, said, "Let's ask him if he does any palm reading."

Woar went out to look at the sky. There were no clouds in it. The sun shone bright and hot.

The lean youth was lifting the wheel into place on the lug bolts. He saw Woar and explained, "Rim cut. Patched it up so she'll hold now."

"Good. How's the road to Ottawa?"

"Bridge out. Want to get on Fifty-South?"

"Yes."

"Topeka, take Kansas Four and Eleven down to Emporia. Good road all the way."

"No bridges out?"

"No. Rained over that way, but the radio says it's O. K. now. Don't get down off the slab and you're all right."

Woar paid for the tire repair. He took the wheel as they drove on again.

"Let's turn on the radio," he suggested to Katheren.

"Music, stock market reports or Amos and Andy?" she asked as the loudspeaker began spitting static at them, and the tubes warmed up.

"Weather," said Woar.

Cicely was derisive: "You ain't taking old grand-pappy's patter to heart, are you?"

The radio said fair tonight and tomorrow for eastern Kansas, light showers in the west. No change in temperature.

When they reached Lawrence, the sky had clouded and the wind blew hard and cold.

Half way to Big Springs, they met approaching cars with windshield wipers still working. Then the road turned black beneath them, and rain pelted down on their heads.

They stopped in a small abandoned churchyard to put up the top. Katheren, Cicely and Caligula took shelter on the porch while Woar, with water trickling under the collar of his mackintosh, made the convertible tight.

The radio was not impressed. In its cheerfulest voice it cajoled them to take to the open road.

"Another week-end of glorious Indian summer is upon us, and with it the old question of where to turn the wheels of the family car. Folks, the answer is waiting for you. Petrolene Products has prepared a folder for you. Why not pick it up today at your neighborhood Petrolene Service Station and plan to visit . . ."

## 3

It was the purest coincidence that led Hilda to the Jayhawk in Topeka, Kansas. The Gouchard Guide for Kansas and Missouri happened to be vintage 1932. The Topeka By-Pass had yet to be built when that was compiled, and Katheren knew nothing of Highway Number Ten, which would have saved them fifteen minutes and much city traffic.

They sloshed through the outskirts of Topeka, therefore, and George asked, "Hungry?"

Cicely said, "Oh, deah me, no! We often diet for weeks on fig newtons, we do!"

"Where to stop?"

Katheren said that Gouchard's recommended Hotel Jayhawk, with Coffee Shop in conjunction.

The Coffee Shop had an air of primeval peace; the somnolent tranquillity of lunch forgotten, dinner not yet a disturbing prospect, and waitresses dozing contentedly at their posts. The rain outside was a soft veil to temper the intrusive world. Cicely's hoarse whisper echoed through the hush, and the cashier raised her eyebrows like an outraged librarian.

"Look!"

A man at a far table—the only other diner in the place—raised his eyebrows also, and put down the newspaper he was reading, accidentally revealing a pint flask of Bourbon that had been concealed by it.

He was Milton Smalnick.

He stared at them in vast disinterest, made no acknowledgment of acquaintance, and returned to his whisky, sandwich, and newspaper.

"You could knock me over with a feather," said Cicely. "Can you imagine?"

Cicely's unmarried status was another development that Katheren didn't know.

"You'll go on from here with your husband, I suppose?"

"With him? Well, I might at that. Rahter the thing to do, I guess, isn't it?"

George, who had fallen behind in the lobby, caught up with them. He had a map in his hand, and a wry smile of satisfaction on his face. It must have been a

guilty smile, for he wiped it off. He ordered a club sandwich in a remote, preoccupied voice.

Smalnick, she supposed, was the mouse at the bottom of George's Cheshire Cat manifestations. She was right. He excused himself, crossed to Smalnick's table and leaned over him for a brief consultation, most of which was inaudible.

"See me in my room in a little while," she heard Smalnick say in a thick voice.

"As you like," said Woar, and returned to his own table. Smalnick in a few minutes swallowed down his whisky, paid the cashier, and went out.

When, in a few more minutes, Cicely rose and elegantly went out after him, Woar wrinkled his nose.

"Milton is drunk as a lord. I wish her luck!"

Katheren said, "Before she comes back again, do you mind telling me what I'm getting into?"

"The Kansas River is rising. The Sunflower Auto Club doesn't know what to expect in the hills south of here. Floods are reported along the Republican River and the Colorado, with a record rainfall of seven inches in the last—"

"Never mind," said Katheren.

She smoked in exasperation. He ate his sandwich.

He had almost finished it when Cicely strolled into the Coffee Shop again. The set of her lips expressed disillusion and lofty disdain. Without saying anything, she sat down and daintily resumed her lunch.

"Did you see your husband?"

"We didn't connect," admitted Cicely, but with implications that the whole subject was distasteful.

"Did you call his room? That's where he went."

"I'm glad you think so."



Woar swallowed the last corner of toast. He leaned forward in something resembling a show of alarm:

“He isn’t in his room?”

“That guy checked out,” said Cicely bitterly, “as soon as he finished his lunch. The way he was moving, he’s a couple of miles out of town by now.”

Woar jumped and ran for the lobby. . . .

## Eleven

Mr. Milton Smalnick, barely able to navigate, had left the Jayhawk, load, luggage and car. Since Kansas is a dry state, his going was anything but inconspicuous.

When last seen by an embittered porter whom he had neglected to tip, Smalnick's direction was west, toward Gage Boulevard.

Gage might lead north to Highway Forty, Manhattan and Salina; or to State Highway Four and another way to Salina; or to add to the confusion, to State Highway Ten and a place called Alma.

George told the two women, "Whether you like it or not, I'm going after Smalnick. Do you prefer to stay here?"

"No," said Katheren.

"Gahd no!" said Cicely.

He shoved Katheren, Cicely and Caligula into the car.

"'After Smalnick' is somewhat vague," Katheren pointed out. "Where in particular, if I may ask?"

"To Gage Boulevard. After that, the devil take the hindmost."

Gage Boulevard on a very rainy afternoon, and Gage Park in particular, was an unreal landscape dashed off by a painter with only gray on his palette and no skill

for the human figure. A few cars sloshed by, at high speed and wrapped in clouds of flying spray.

Woar turned right till he came to a filling station where he could inquire.

"Have you seen a Lagonda pass this way?"

"A what, mister?"

Moments were lost in a description of the lines of a Lagonda, and more in an abortive discussion (on the part of the filling station attendant) of foreign cars in general. But the Lagonda probably had not passed. Woar put about and chose Highway Four.

At a sudden turning they came to another filling station. There, by a dazzling stroke of luck, the Lagonda had stopped for gas and advice about the road to Emporia.

"Not maybe more than five minutes ago. Well, maybe ten. Anyhow, he wasn't wastin' any time. . . ."

Nor was Woar.

He drove the seventy-odd miles to Emporia in slightly less than two hours; considering the weather and the state of the roads, not bad time at all.

He lost half an hour in Emporia making sure Smalnick had passed that way. In the end, nothing was sure, except that only a madman would have continued south on Highway Eleven, which left Fifty westward as Smalnick's only choice.

Not that Smalnick might not be mad.

So, drawn on the end of a tenuous thread of reasoning, Woar headed the Buick for Newton and Hutchinson. Darkness fell, early and sudden. Rain pounded viciously on the windshield. Light from the headlamps seemed to be blotted up by the storm before it lit the road ahead. Cicely huddled in her corner, resenting the discomfort with a whole heart.

The radio, always opportune, warned them, "The storm that for the last three days swept eastern Colorado is now making itself felt over Kansas. Present rains in addition to regional disturbances have swollen some rivers, particularly the Kansas and the Cottonwood. According to latest information, State Highway Eleven is closed to traffic south of Emporia and is not advisable between Admire and Eskridge. . . ."

"Didn't we just come that way?" asked Katheren.

"We did," said Woar. "Listen."

". . . though the new section west of Strong City is expected to hold. In other states, the Republican River is rising rapidly and many sections of Colorado are isolated due to floods. In California, the movie stars of Hollywood sweltered today in a record-breaking heat wave that reached one hundred and two degrees. . . ."

"Poor creatures," said Katheren, and groped on the dial for music.

"Got anything against them?" demanded Cicely suddenly. She was rather like the dormouse. She slept mostly, but roused herself now and then to make querulous remarks.

Katheren told her to go to sleep.

"I ain't sleepy in the least. What's the idea, chasing Milton all over the country? All right, I shouldn't ask questions. Only don't you think I ain't aware what's going on. . . ."

She made a few huffy noises into her fox fur and dropped off to sleep again.

Katheren asked, "Where is the Republican River?"

"North, I think. A tributary of the Kansas."

"And the Cottonwood?"

"On our left. Somewhere in the dark, not far off."

"I hope it knows its place."

Having little else to do, Katheren studied her husband's face in the faint upward glow from the instruments. His cheeks were drawn, his mouth tight and purposeful, and his eyes squinty, almost haggard, from the strain of driving. So she asked him:

"Do you get any pleasure out of this?"

"Do I? I hardly think so. I don't know."

"You're completely absorbed in it. You couldn't think of anything but the murderer and tracking him down if you tried, could you?"

"Why should I?"

"I don't know. I'm only your wife. I'm discussing this objectively, you understand?"

"Quite."

"I'm adjusting myself to the facts."

"Good."

"Detecting seems to take a lot more of a husband than banking or bookkeeping. Not that I've ever had experience with a bookkeeper. I merely use that as an instance."

"Ah."

"When you say 'Ah,' you're very remote. I thought when I married you I'd find you less remote. Sorry, George, but I don't."

"Dash it all, Katheren, you—"

"Let me say it. We're well on the way to a misunderstanding and a separation. Of course, you think you're in the right. I also think I'm in the right. People always do. Let's disregard personal feelings, though, and get down to the basic cause of contention. You know what it is, don't you?"

"Rex Shanley?"

"More than that. Your profession. I met you because you happened to be a detective and if I leave you, it

will be because you happen to be a detective. Now, to be sensible and logical about it, why don't we agree to remove the cause? Why be a detective, George? You'll answer that you've been trained that way and your heart's in it and so on. Well, I say to that, your heart ought to belong not to crime but to me."

"In other words, choose between you and crime?"

"More or less. Take your time about it, though. You're rather angry now."

"Who the devil wouldn't be, Katheren? If you don't like the kind of man I am, you shouldn't have married me. I'm sorry, but my sense of humor doesn't seem to be working very well this evening."

"I noticed."

"If you regret having married me, that's all there is to it."

"Not quite, George. I set out to be your wife. I hate to admit failure."

"*Damn* you, Katheren!"

"Men are impossible to reason with. Too much self-esteem and too little willingness to face cold facts. Because I put our relations on a practical, unemotional basis, you immediately want to throttle me. That isn't exactly the spirit of enlightened discussion, so let's drop the matter for now, shall we?"

"Quite."

Just to show there were no hard feelings, she reached his pipe out of his pocket, filled it, and helped him with a light.

2

At Strong City, which was not a city by any extension of the word, they were confronted with shuddering red lanterns and a sign:

## BRIDGE OUT

## DETOUR

An arrow pointed left.

They couldn't help themselves. They were forced to get down off the slab.

The road, however muddy, seemed direct and well-intended. It led them south through what appeared to be rolling country. Overhead an occasional ghostly tree loomed in the lights of the car, then silently vanished behind them. Woar slowed the car to forty, then thirty.

"This surface," he explained, "is suitable for skiing."

They passed through Cottonwood Falls, slightly more metropolitan than Strong City. The detour signs pointed farther south.

"The surface," Woar complained, "is not improving."

Nor were the detour signs. They stubbornly avoided a place named Bazaar (marked on a lonely sign) and headed west again. Almost immediately they pointed south, then west, then south, till Woar had no sense of direction except up and down.

Wet clay degenerated into the stuff bogs are made of. The clump and slap of what was kicked up by the wheels against the underbody became a monotonous thunder. All too frequently a pool of water would show up in front of them, and shatter into a great deluge before the wheels. Woar slowed to twenty and often changed down into second.

"Ain't there some place we could stop?" asked Cicely, suddenly aware of bad going and increasing storm. Her voice sounded unsteady.

"All too many places," said Katheren. "We're trying to avoid them."

A whoosh of water from a particularly deep puddle smote the windshield. Cicely gasped. The motor faltered, ran unevenly on five or six cylinders, then slowly recovered its stride.

Woar said, "If I wet all eight plugs at once, we'll stop for the night. However . . ."

"However what?"

"I'm afraid daybreak may offer no advantage."

So War kept on.

Pursuit of Milton Smalnick—Lefty, the real Smalnick had called him in his telegram—was becoming a far-off dream, slightly farther off with every sloshing mile.

A savage, angry little creek wove along close to the road, frequently passing under it, foaming within a few inches of the insecure plank bridges in the hollows among the hills. The bridges had a nasty way of quivering under Hilda's wheels.

They came to a settlement named Wonseur. At least Katheren supposed so after consulting the map. Wonseur was dark, like a lamp that has blown out in the wind. The detour markings had forsaken them.

Woar had to admit it. He was completely and supremely lost.

Then a choice of two roads confronted them; two equally uninviting mud sluices leading off into blackness.

"Which?"

"I don't know," Katheren confessed. "The left leads away from the highway, the right leads toward it. But that's only woman's intuition. I may be wrong."

Woar chose the right fork.

A distant dancing glimmer far to the rear after they



made the turn, encouraged them a little. Another car, lost as they were? Some living thing at least and the first they had come upon in half an hour.

"Coming after us," said Katheren.

"I can see it," said Woar.

"Rather fast, too."

"Idiot!"

The glare of headlamps overtook them. Woar twisted the rear-view mirror up to keep the light out of his eyes. He let the Buick slow from twenty to ten; he pulled as far to the edge of the road as he dared; he wound the window down, to be ready to signal.

The car behind tooted imperiously, started to pull out.

Woar saw water in the road ahead, and a narrowing of the road at the bottom of a short declivity. He signaled a warning not to pass. The car nosed alongside, attempting it nevertheless.

Treading with terrible delicacy, Woar braked.

The other car shot past.

Woar felt his wheels slither, perceived a majestic and uncontrollable skid that would chute them to the bottom of the hollow. There was nothing he could do about it. The car that had passed them bounded briskly into the water ahead, sent up a grand muddy cloud and suddenly nosed down—a dead stop in the middle of the bridge! From under its hood came a fine large cloud of white steam.

The whole affair had passed out of Woar's hands. He was skidding, he would hit it, and there it was.

He shut his own eyes and flung out an arm to cover Katheren's face. He heard a beautiful rending crash

and a great roaring of water. He felt a jolt that flung his middle against the steering wheel and knocked the wind out of him.

One way or another, he had caught up with Smalnick's car at last.

## Twelve

Woar, wondering if he had broken a rib, got out. He stood in a foot and a half of very cold running water to assess the damage.

The Buick had lost front bumper, left headlamp, most of its chromium nose and all recognizable shape from both mudguards.

The Lagonda's exquisite coachwork was no longer exquisite.

What lay under water had to be guessed; but Woar felt reasonably sure that the left front wheel had gone through a rotten plank in the bridge, leaving the car resting on its front axle. Since it blocked the narrow bridge, and since Hilda had skidded in at an angle that left her immovable while the Lagonda remained in the way, obviously the Lagonda had to be made to run.

Woar looked inside.

Smalnick, or Lefty or whoever he was, sat helplessly at the wheel, muttering an unprintable litany. Catching up with the man, Woar gathered, was no job at all compared to extracting sense from him. Arrogance, shrewdness and whisky had boiled down into a solid lump of misery. For once his incorrigible habit of picking up company came in handy, though; a fair-haired, blue-eyed youth in sweater and corduroys sat beside him, making hasty repairs to a bloody nose.

Woar said, "Hello. Where did you come from?"

"Baltimore. You folks going to Salt Lake?"

"No. Dodge City and Santa Fé. I meant, how did you get here?"

"Used the old thumb. This bird stopped for me outside of Emporia—and believe me, mister, if he ain't tight, he's nuts."

"He's both," said Woar. "Come on, give me some help."

The hitch-hiker produced a cheerful smile, stripped off shoes, socks and trousers, and climbed out. Leaving Smalnick to his sorrows, the two lifted the Lagonda's hood.

"Wet plugs. Maybe the coil and ignition, too."

Woar said, "Plugs first. Now if I can get a match to burn . . ."

He did, and they burned the spark plugs dry with gasoline from the strainer. They mopped as much water as they could from the wiring. Carburetors, fortunately, stood high enough to be out of the flood gurgling about the crank-case.

At first try, the Lagonda popped and snapped. At the fifth, she took it, slowly warmed, and at last began hitting on all twelve cylinders.

Infinitely more difficult, since the axle lay under water, was the job of raising the front wheel. For that they took apart a fence for levers. Prizing the axle, blocking the wheel, they laboriously raised it enough to improvise planking for the tire to ride on.

"Now—can you drive?"

"If I can't," said the cheerful hitch-hiker, "I'm outa luck, because I'm taking the wheel from here in. I got a home and mother to think of."

With Woar calling directions, the boy drove up to what passed in that part of Kansas for dry land.

Next came Hilda's turn.

Mechanically she was undamaged. With help from the boy, she was inched across the makeshift planking in the bridge—more difficult than it sounds, what with an unhappy tendency on the part of the planking to float off downstream.

The beam of the remaining headlamp pointed up into the clouds.

"I'll have to follow your lights," Woar decided. "Stop in the next town."

Which was Elm Point, on high ground and the highway.

Woar's injunction to stop there, however, wasn't needed.

They were lucky to reach the town under mule power, and by midnight.

How many motorists spent that night lost in the maze of mud lanes about Wonseur isn't known. Those that got through to Elm Point found a wide, fast torrent between themselves and the town proper. Somewhere under the torrent, reputedly, lay a bridge.

For five dollars a car, an enterprising farmer towed futile mechanism over that bridge, with nothing but faith in his mules' feet to keep them from running off the edge. With motors turned off and with passengers holding their feet up from the flood seeping under the doors, each car was pulled through the river.

Almost in vain, it seemed, when they reached the other side.

First the Lagonda, then the Buick drew up before the five-story brick building, dark and rain-washed, the

wan pride of Elm Point and unmistakably named *Hotel Excelsior*.

"What do you think?" Woar asked, looking up dubiously at it.

"To me," said Katheren, "it's a palace of delight. And come what may, we're going to sleep in it."

## 2

It can be said for them that they tried.

They straggled yawning and groggy into a bare, fly-specked hotel office. Its very lack of character was deceptive. Hotel Excelsior only revealed itself by slow degrees.

The Tozers had been caught in its web, and the Winter twins and Ray Kemp; Nick Leeds and Ruth Shanley; and likewise five other motorists, sixteen passengers from a stranded bus, a highway inspector on emergency duty and a woman rumored to be expecting a child.

The roster should have been warning enough in itself. At the time, it only pointed out the surprising resources of the hotel, that it could accommodate them all.

Katheren remembers a tall, solemn woman, all in black like a piece of burned toast, who got them to write their names in pale ink on a yellowed register. Like previous names, theirs faded to a ghostly scrawling as soon as the ink dried.

The hitch-hiker, blue with cold and sneezing cheerfully, was the center of attention just then. Woar was demanding a room and fussing about a hot bath for him. The solemn woman resented fuss and the prospect of making hot water.

While this was going on, Cicely dropped out of sight. At least, she held aloof from the party, and Katheren had the impression she was off searching for an all-night lunch counter. In any case, she had seemed particularly determined to avoid Milton, and Milton stood at Woar's elbow, explaining incoherently all the ways he might have let the Buick pass him in the maze of the detour. When they went to their rooms, Cicely wasn't among their number.

The woman solemnly opened a door and beckoned. They followed her out of the musty lamp-lit office into a dark place where the musty smell seemed to originate and rain drummed loudly in the obscurity far above their heads.

She lighted a candle and placed it on a bare chair.

Its glow flickered feebly, shining in an immense cavity, a closed central court that ran from the ground floor to an invisible roof. Round the walls ran four galleries, one above the other, connected by stairs. From the galleries opened innumerable doors—that is, if they *were* doors, and not optical illusions.

The woman beckoned again, and led them up the stairs through layers of mustiness and slanting bars of shadow to the top gallery.

Number 547 was unlocked and opened for the Woars.

And Katheren, stepping over the threshold into the total darkness of her room, knew that she had come to the original source of the musty smell, and of all musty smells everywhere. That and the dust and stagnation, tintured with the reek of a match she put to the candle on a marble wash-stand, had a physical effect on her like the first intimation of the flu coming on.

The room, Katheren decided, had not been disturbed in a decade.

"Look," she said to her husband, and touched the gray counterpane on the bed. The gray was dust. Pale white showed where she wiped it away.

She touched the gray lace curtains, stiff and heavy as fretsaw work. Dust came down in clouds and scintillated in the candle flame.

She opened the mahogany veneer clothes press, and an outraged field mouse ran out.

"Bring Caligula up here," said Katheren firmly, "or take me down to Caligula."

"Right," said Woar. "And food, and whisky. You need something. So do I. And if possible, I'll have Hilda put right."

He went down the stairs, accompanied by hollow echoes that redoubled till he sounded like the retreat from Moscow.

When he came back, he brought an oily egg sandwich, a bottle of fiery bootleg Scotch bought through a darkened alley window, and news.

"Beardsley and his wife started more than two hours ago for Newton. They didn't arrive. Nick Leeds called through to find out. He's worried."

"Why?"

"The river runs beside the road all the way. It's out of hand. The Beardsleys may be in it—or they may be comfortably stuck in the mud somewhere. We don't know."

"Well, we're lucky to be here. We've got a dry bed to sleep in, at least," and Katheren applied herself to sandwich and whisky.

"Cicely's on a binge," he told her.

"Is she?"

"Half seas over, at the lunch room. Relaxing after the nervous strain, I take it."



Katheren wasn't interested in Cicely. Caligula huffed and puffed at the smell of mice, and George was extracting his wiry body from wet clothes. That was enough for her.

Footsteps came clumping up the stair.

"More guests?"

"Kemp, probably," said Woar, pulling a sweater over his head. "I asked him to come up. Do you mind?"

As Katheren remarked, what use her minding when Kemp was already knocking at the door? George took a carefully folded square of paper out of the pocket of the coat she had thrown over her legs.

"What's that? A warrant?"

"Merely an I.O.U.," he told her, and went to the door. The conference with Kemp took place just outside on the balcony, and in whispers, so that Katheren could hear practically everything they said.

Kemp seemed to be trying to express gratitude that was almost beyond his powers of communication:

". . . Borrow the money somehow. . . . Working my way through Stanford, and my folks can't afford to help me much. . . . Never forget this, Mr. Brendan, as long as I live. . . ."

"Rot," said Woar's clipped voice. "Forget it tomorrow. Let me see your hand."

Sounds of slight movement outside, then Woar grunted:

"Knock him out?"

"Sure. I caught him on the side of the head. Dropped him like that."

"You know that a short time later he was pushed under the wheels of my car?"

"Yes, I know."

"Did you do it?"

Silence.

"Henry Tozer helped you that night. Why?"

Kemp's voice, hesitant, sullen, replied, "No use asking. I can't tell you."

"If you're shielding anyone, you're making a damn bad job of it, Ray. Why did you strike Shanley? Why did you want him killed? How will you get away with it if you can't answer those very obvious questions?"

". . . Others to think of."

George called him a fool. The footsteps clumped down the stair again. Woar came into the room and poured himself a nip of the whisky.

He locked the door, sprawled on the bed without taking off his clothes, and kissed her good night. A cool kiss, given in constraint and in constraint accepted. He fell instantly asleep.

He had the knack for it. Katheren hadn't.

Long after silence fell in the queer structure, half-sounds persisted: whispering somewhere, or perhaps the gurgle of rain through the gutters on the roof; the creak of floors and furniture, like stealthy prowling; soft pressure on the door, pushing, relenting, pushing again, as if cautious fingers were trying the lock. And somewhere an almost inaudible moaning, doubtless the wind.

Katheren left the candle burning and coaxed an uneasy Caligula to sleep on the foot of the bed.

3

She never heard the cry that wakened her. She found herself sitting upright in bed, staring into the darkness and telling Caligula to stop barking.

Her candle, she gathered, had burned out. There really had been a cry, because George was throwing

open the door, and other doors were being thrown open, and feet were running and voices asking empty questions.

She couldn't find shoes or coat in the darkness. She threw the counterpane over her shoulders, shut in Caligula, and looked down from the balcony. Candles glimmered, matches flared up, an oil lamp in the hands of the solemn proprietress made a patch of light that started up the stairs.

Along the gallery below and across the court hurried George with flashlight in hand. He and Nick Leeds together pushed through the open door into what Katheren by sheer conviction knew must be Ruth Shanley's room.

Lamps, candles, voices and feet came from everywhere, concentrating there. Katheren, watching from above, had the deadly feeling of knowing what was to come, of having lived through the event in a previous time—a previous place—Migler's.

Except for stocking feet on a very cold floor, she imagined herself suspended in a musty void, unrelated to that cluster of tourists and bus passengers pressing about the dark door. As she expected, in a little while the cluster began to come apart, turning blank faces away from violence and disaster. Their curiosities were satisfied. They had something to cluck tongues about.

Someone came up the stairs to Katheren's floor—Agatha Tozer, with a candle.

"It's too awful," she said.

"Is she—?"

"I couldn't see. How people do push and shove! But you can just imagine—a pair of hands coming out of the dark, getting you by the throat!"

"She was choked, then?"

"From what I could hear. Who choked her, I'd like to know? Dreadful business, Mrs. Brendan! You keep your door locked—not that a locked door did Ruth much good, did it? Mr. Brendan says the lock was picked with a hairpin. Connie, come to your room before you catch cold standing about in the halls . . .!"

It was later, when comparative quiet had fallen, that George came upstairs and told Katheren the rest:

"Felt hands on her throat, screamed, was knocked on the head for her pains. Nick's bringing her up here. Nothing serious."

"What would you call serious?"

"If she hadn't been able to scream. Fatal. It would have been murder."

Nick, grim-faced, opened the door for a pale, nerveless Ruth, who let herself be put in Katheren's bed. Nick had trousers on and a leather jacket, but the fur on his broad chest stuck through. By candlelight, the man looked huge.

Woar took another nip from the bottle, passed it to Nick, and writhed into his mackintosh.

"More detecting?" Katheren asked him.

"Not this time. A hunt."

"Is that all I'm to be told?"

It was Nick who said, "Don't worry about him, Mrs. Brendan. We're after a woman, and she hasn't got a gun."

"A woman?"

Woar explained precisely, "Not a man, but a woman. She also robbed the hotel cash box of a sum of money—fifty or a hundred dollars, according to report. She fled in a light truck, property of the Kansas Highway Department, and when last seen was on the road to Newton. That's all we know at present."

"Who was the woman?"

"Cicely."

The two men were ready. Nick paused in the doorway to beseech Katheren, "See that nothing happens to her, will you, Mrs. Brendan?"

"I'll do my best, Nick. Will you be long?"

"Don't know. We're working for the constable now—we're the posse. Wish us luck!"

Something cruel and vindictive about the way he said it caused Katheren to shudder. The door closed. They went down the stairs.

Cicely had tried to kill Ruth Shanley! Cicely had robbed a cash box and run away!

The fact was so utterly appalling and unexpected that Katheren had trouble believing it. She spread the dusty quilt over Ruth's legs and fixed her a drink. Nothing unbelievable about those bruises on Ruth's throat!

"If the room was dark, how did you know it was Cicely?"

Ruth's voice, hoarse and low, told her, "Those long fingernails? And the fox fur? Couldn't be anybody else."

"But *why*? Why should she want to—to hurt you?"

"I guess I stood in her way. I guess she couldn't wait. . . ."

"Wait for what?"

But Ruth only shook her head and closed her eyes.

Katheren went to the window.

On the patch of pavement outside the front door of the hotel huddled a group of men, foreshortened below her. An oldish man, in a black rubber coat, the constable probably, was talking to them. She could see his jaw move, the ruin of what had been a strong, jutting jaw before some enthusiastic dentist had got in his work on it. He was giving them orders.

Smalnick was there, the Winter twins, Ray Kemp, several other men she had never seen before, and Henry Tozer. At George's elbow stood Nick Leeds, and the light from the lanterns slashed across his taut features.

What he would do to Cicely if he found her first, Katheren preferred not to imagine.

## 4

The light truck had been found about two hundred yards from the hotel, abandoned in a roadside mire. Cicely's driving had not been up to the exigencies of Kansas.

The problem had simplified itself to one of beating the surrounding flats for a desperate, drunken creature in high-heeled shoes. The constable thought she'd be found cowering out of the rain in some abandoned shack, or behind a billboard or under a cottonwood tree.

The posse spread out. Those who knew it best had been assigned the village of Elm Point itself. The others took the fields.

Hazlitt Woar found himself alone with a sizzling lantern in a world of rain. Mud sucked at his shoes when he strayed from the Newton highway. He stayed on the highway.

Other lanterns bobbed along to the right and left of him. They vanished, appeared and vanished again with increasing irregularity as the hunt spread out. After twenty minutes of walking, Woar saw no more lanterns, only surrounding night.

No use hurrying. He had ideas of his own.

She would stay on the road, for the same reason he did. Cicely would run for a bit, then sober up, realize

what she had done and what she was in for, and slog along in growing weariness towards Newton. The road was closed to traffic, but she probably didn't know that. She might even have forlorn hopes of being picked up by a passing motorist and taken comfortably to Newton.

The strain of her masquerade, he told himself, had at last been too much for her. The carefully applied glaze of refinement had cracked, exposed her essential crudeness. In a way, it was what he had hoped for. . . .

He passed through a wood and between two little hills, as well as he could make out. Then the rain stopped.

In the silence, the grumble of a heavy torrent off to his left came clearly to him. The river.

A short way farther, he heard a scream. A woman's voice, distinctly. Some distance off, and confused with the river sound. It came again, and he placed it to the left and ahead.

He called a "hello there!" and ran. Once he thought he saw the quick gleam of a light in that direction, but accepted it with reservations. His own lantern might have been reflected from a wet fence post.

He ran and called. He came to the end of the fence, and struck out to the left, across muddy, rising ground, too uneven for haste.

Better stop, he decided, and make sure. His calling had gone unanswered for perhaps five minutes.

"Hello there!"

This time an answer came from the near-by roar of water, a man's voice, a shout of, "Over here!"

Just beyond the rising ground, where the yellow swirls of the flood lay thinly on the meadow near the river bank, he came upon Smalnick and his lantern. The man was far out in the water, dangerously far,

.

reaching frantically for a dark human shape caught among some drifting branches.

The strength of the water threatened to sweep away branches, dark shape and Smalnick downstream. He was up to his arm-pits, floundering, precariously holding the lantern high. He slipped. The lantern disappeared.

Woar shouted, "Let go, you fool!"

Smalnick let go. The human thing whirled away and vanished.

When Woar could get to him, the man was half swimming, half treading the mud beneath him, fighting hard to keep from being pulled under. Woar caught a hand, hauled him to safety.

"The ground—drops away," panted Smalnick, almost apologetically.

"Cicely?"

"In those branches. That's why I—that was her."

"Alive?"

Smalnick, a stocky drowned rat weighted with his streaming clothes, stopped in his tracks. He looked at Woar with intense surprise.

"Alive? She must have been. You don't see me rescuing dead people, do you?"

Woar grunted.

"She's dead by now, at any rate," he said quietly, and led Smalnick towards the road.

5

Having wrung out their clothes as well as they could, they trudged back to Elm Point together, in no haste. Cicely would get there before them. The river and its passenger were beyond human powers to interfere.



Smalnick had heard the cry, he said, just as George had. He had been nearer, though. She was in the water when he reached her, and floating with the branches. He thought she was trying to get away from him.

"Did she speak to you?"

"No, she didn't. Maybe she was drowning."

"Did she try to swim?"

"Well, she was laying there in the bushes, a black spot, and I couldn't make out—"

"You did all you could," George assured him. "You came within a deuce of losing your own life. Did you see anyone else?"

"No."

"Considering the circumstances, it will probably go on the records as a suicide. Anybody who'd take to that river rather than be caught would be definitely choosing death."

Smalnick humbly thought so too.

Humility and Milton Smalnick seemed to get on well together for strangers; but during that walk back to Elm Point, Smalnick, except as a legendary being to whom incense was burned in Hollywood, ceased to exist as Smalnick.

The impersonation no longer worked, and he knew it.

"The hell of it is, Mr. Brendan, I'll lose my job. Sure, my name's Lefty. Sure, I work for Milton Smalnick. I'm his secretary, see, and I know him like a brother from way back. Sometimes I call myself Milton Smalnick, it's a kick, people drop everything and run when they hear the name. Milton knows I do it, he even gets a laugh out of it. He sometimes even puts me up to it himself when he don't want to be bothered

with people, and I take 'em out on parties and so on. . . .

"He sends me East to bring this swell car of his back to Beverly Hills for him. For God's sake, who's gonna mind a joke? I say I'm Smalnick, women fall for it, and I have a lot of free comedy. Look, how do I know that old fool Shanley is gonna get killed? How do I know Cicely ain't really Milton's cousin? I play straight—and now where am I! Milton's name gets in the papers, and he gets sore, and I'm crucified for a lousy joke. Believe me, Mr. Brendan, I been sweatin' blood all by myself ever since I identify that jerk back in Ohio to call off the cops."

"You *didn't* know Shanley, then?"

"So help me, I *did*, and just the way I told you, too."

"You picked up Cicely in New York?"

"Just like I told you."

"Not in Uniontown, Pennsylvania?"

"The hell with Uniontown. I picked her up in New York."

"You also forged Smalnick's name to the check you gave Beardsley, remember."

Lefty remembered. With touching docility, he only asked that everybody be easy on him.

"I have the check," George told him, just as the stark buildings of Elm Point came into view against a gray-ing dawn. "I'm going to keep it, and your story, for my own peculiar uses."

"You want money outa me?"

"Not at all. I want the truth, and for reasons I doubt if I could make clear to you in the short time at our disposal. Only one thing you need be afraid of."

"What's that?"

"I'm wanted by the police. My name is Hazlitt Woar,

not George Brendan. If I'm caught, your check, your story, everything, becomes public property. Better for you, undoubtedly, if I'm not caught. Do you understand?"

Lefty said he did.

He went off to look up the constable, then, and George made himself as comfortable as possible in the office of the Hotel Excelsior, ill-advised monument to some forgotten civic enterprise, while he waited for the rest of the hunters to come in.

He had time for a quick nap.

Even under those conditions, sleep hit him like a soft bludgeon, and when he woke, he was refreshed.

## Thirteen

Katheren woke out of a bad dream. George was dead.

The dream had a particularly convincing quality, even after she was awake, because she could hear the ringing of shovels on the coffin. But it was morning, in Hotel Excelsior, and the sun was up, shining on the water pitcher nestling in its basin. Ruth slept peacefully beside her, and the muddy hulk of Nick Leeds snored with Caligula in his lap in the room's only chair. Comfortable, rather than surprising, this having a crowd up to sleep in one's bedroom. . . .

The shovel noise came not from George's grave, but from a muddy truck in the street below, where a shift of road repairmen were starting out for work. It was very early, not quite ten to six.

Still, it would be nice to make sure about George.

Having slept in her clothes that night, she got ready, herself, the luggage and Caligula, in the proverbial number of shakes.

She met her husband on the stair. Two things were immediately evident: he was not dead, and he was more unhappy than she had ever seen him before.

Only his head and shoulders showed above the level of the top step. A dirty glare fell on him from the glass skylight in the ceiling. His face looked horribly drawn and white.

"Is the coffee that bad?"

He shook his head to her. He said, "Hurry, Katheren."

"What's the matter, George?"

"Hurry," he said, and the way he said it was still more alarming.

"Did you find Cicely?"

"Yes."

The proprietress met them at the bottom of the stairs. She made a beckoning gesture towards an enormous oblong table in the center of the court. On a gray tablecloth stood a wan potted palm surrounded by oranges.

"Hot cakes or fried mush thirty-five cents," she told them. "Bacon and eggs or small steak fifty cents."

"No breakfast," said Woar firmly. "The bill, please."

"Just you two?"

"Yes."

"Two-fifty each, makes five dollars. Say now, that woman who stole my money—were you folks acquainted in any way?"

Woar's hand rested a moment on Katheren's arm, a warning. He said, "We don't know anything about her, I'm afraid."

"Don't know about her?"

"No."

The widow held Woar's ten-dollar bill in her hand doubtfully. She led them into the office, put on glasses and consulted the register.

"What's her name, Bonner, Bonnel, Bonnet?"

"We don't know her name," said Woar firmly. "We don't know anything about her."

"Well, I guess you don't look like the kind of folks would lie about a thing like that," said the woman, and

sneered as if the opinion ran contrary to her better judgment. She painstakingly made change.

Woar stuffed the money in his pocket, took up the luggage and led Katheren out into the street.

A score of stark brick buildings, another score of scattered shacks protected by huge cottonwood trees, constituted Elm Point.

Even at a little after six, men and women were picking their way about in the mud of the lanes, or over the great clods of mud that had been tracked up on the highway. A group of them stood about the end of an open truck that had stopped across the road from the Excelsior. They gaped at something lying within.

Woar had driven the Buick from the garage. Its nose looked no less battered and discouraging by daylight.

"She'll run, though," said Woar. "Still sound at heart. Only her beauty has suffered."

"Cicely, I take it, is in jail?"

"Not this morning, my dear."

"May I be told why?"

"You may not."

He started up the motor. Katheren wiped Caligula's muddy paws with tissue and let him sit between them. As the car moved away, and she turned to throw the tissue into the gutter, she again noticed the cluster of people about the end of the truck.

"What are they looking at, George?"

"Who?"

"Those people. What's in the bottom of that Highway Department truck? What's happened to Cicely, George?"

He shifted into high gear with grim concentration. He intended not to answer.

"Cicely's in the bottom of the truck, isn't she?"  
From the way his lips tightened, she knew it was so.

## 2

"How far to the state line?" he asked.

"More than three hundred miles. Three hundred and thirty."

The sun shone at their backs. On the level white road, banked above the wet plains and the winding river, Woar let the Buick out to seventy-five. No other cars were traveling yet.

The taut look on her husband's face and the rattling whine of the wind through the shattered radiator guard combined to increase Katheren's apprehension.

"Coffee in a thermos," said Woar, "and an egg sandwich. Best I could do, Katheren. I put them in the glove box."

Katheren got out the thermos, sipped some of the very strong and very hot coffee from it, and said, "I'm quite able to stand the ghastly details, George."

"Ghastly is the word."

"Go on, please."

"Her body was fished out of the river at day-break by the crew of men working on the bridge. It had been washed down to them from above."

"Drowned, or—"

"Apparently drowned. An accident. Suicide. Murder by any other name. You see, the corpse bears marks of violence about the head, shows little water in the lungs. Purse recovered, contents missing—but for one handbill offering reward for information leading to arrest of Hazlitt G. B. Woar—"

"Cicely took it!"

"Possibly. Attempt to suppress that piece of evidence under the nose of the constable didn't come off. Also, Milton Smalnick heroically trying to save the woman from a watery grave met me on the scene of the crime. Means, motive, opportunity. Add them up as the slow but astute mind of the constable of Elm Point eventually must, and you'll appreciate my reason for hurrying the hell out of the State of Kansas."

"You can't be serious, George!"

"I bloody well am! I'm practically wanted for murder!"

## 3

The morning was still too young for traffic. The battered Buick must have stood out like a thicket of sore thumbs.

The flooded section of highway between Elm Point and Newton had been diked off and opened during the early hours. They got safely through, and through Newton, circumspectly, via the suburbs where they hoped they wouldn't be noticed.

Leaving the city limits behind on their way to Hutchinson, George relaxed a little and gulped some coffee out of the thermos.

"So far, so good," said Katheren.

"So far, not far enough. Poor devils!"

"Who? Us?"

"No. All those on land or sea wanted by the police."

On both sides of the road lay farms, open plains, little woods, none without freshly deposited puddles and ponds. Through the wet land ran wet side roads, oozy, open wounds in the earth's skin. Woar waved a hand at them:

"We're trapped by the law on the highway, we're



trapped by that if we leave it. Off the slab! Now I know what it means!"

He stepped up the speed to eighty.

Whether it was Cicely's absence, or that they were running away from the Shanley case in deep earnest now, or that sharing a hazard caused it, the Woars were on better terms than they had been for days.

That morning Katheren found herself actually admiring George, profession and all. Twenty-four hours earlier, the subject of murder had inspired her with loathing; now she was strongly tempted to ask questions. Her curiosity and her pride had it out in her mind. Pride won the decision, on points.

Behind them in Elm Point, a stocky young man who was no longer Milton J. Smalnick climbed into his boss's Lagonda. Chastened and humble, he hoped the Shanley case would never hear of him again. He certainly counted on making himself scarce, for he left his luggage unpacked and his hotel bill unpaid rather than face his fellow-guests that morning.

Not long after him, Nick Leeds and Ruth took off. By sheer insistence, Nick had persuaded her. He was heroically happy, in spite of a tinge of uneasiness about her consent. They were to be married in New Mexico—if possible, in Santa Fé.

Then the Tozers. Except in Connie's young heart, there was little joy in the Nash that day. Agatha hadn't told her husband about the money for the screen test—and since Cicely had changed into a thief and drowned herself, she didn't know what to do. Henry, for a whimsical little man, was looking pitiably care-worn and haggard, more so than any sacrifice of life's great adventure would account for.

Kemp and the Winter twins started latest, due to

oversleeping on the part of the twins. Because their consciences were clear?

At any rate, there they were, all of them, westbound and bound together by what they had done, since at dawn they had formed another council of war. It was at Tozer's suggestion that they had decided not to tell anything about Cicely. What the police don't know won't hurt them. They had cleared their skirts of Shanley's death before; they could clear them of Cicely's this time. Why get drawn into a long-winded investigation, coroner's inquest, all that kind of thing?

One significant difference, though, between Migler's and Elm Point: any honest doubts about murder in Ohio must have disappeared in Kansas. The innocent might suppress evidence once (after all, no man wants to be dragged into court) but not twice. They had confessed to guilt.

And so the mystery of Rex Shanley entered its last phase, one of fear and expectancy, the last desperate covering up of a slayer who still hopes to get away with it.

And the Woars? They still had their hopes too. For that little while, they seemed to have recaptured their old and easy affections. The inevitable separation was not to be thought of.

"Damn me, my love," chuckled George after successfully passing through Hutchinson, "if we aren't getting away with it!"

He swooped Hilda round the rump of a waddling trailer. *California Here We Come* was painted on its sides.

"A trip every motorist should make!" Katheren observed.

"See America First!"

"Unforgettable experience. Over this route have traveled the greatest of America's great!"

"The Path of Empire!"

Caligula squirmed his screw tail and grinned. George and Katheren had a bout of giggles. George said, "See if any coffee's left, and we'll drink to the future—while there is one."

4

Once, near Kinsley, at the bridge over the Arkansas River, they thought the jig was up.

A barricade shut off the road, and a highway policeman waved them to stop. He had a car. It was useless to turn and run for it. George stopped.

"Just ease along, Buick," the policeman ordered. "Shoulder's kind of washed out yonder. Stay to the middle an' you're all right."

One Kansas policeman will always remember the stranger with the English accent who gave him five dollars and said, "My wife and I, we love you very, very much."

Near Garden City, an ominous black sedan trailed the Woars for more than five miles before George could lose it. In Garden City, too, they picked up another telegram from Washington:

MARYS PARENTS VERY STRICT. URGENT YOU DO NOT  
LET THEM KNOW YOU ARE IN TOWN.

GAILLARD

"Meaning 'in the United States'?"

"So I gather," said Woar.

They raced along a perfect and strangely empty stretch of slab with the swollen Arkansas River sluicing eastward on their left and vast, gently rolling prairie

extending in all directions to a far horizon. Grazing land had taken the place of farms. Katheren had never seen so many unbroken miles of wire fence before. . . .

She sat up abruptly, aware she had been dozing. The brakes tugged Hilda to a halt.

"Look," said George grimly.

It was an enormous detour sign, spreading across the road. An enormous arrow, like the hand of fate, pointed into the hills to the north. The detour, a gash of rutted morass churned by wheels and patched with standing water, ran to the horizon and beyond—as far as the North Pole, for all the Woars knew. Like a horrid warning, a mud-plastered and abandoned Chevrolet lay on its side in a puddle.

"Two miles west of here," said Woar wistfully, staring past the detour sign, "is the State of Colorado. The police don't know about us there. The cows are fresher and the trees greener and the nightingales do sing. Ah, God!"

He gingerly turned Hilda down off the slab.

## 5

For fifty odd miles, seldom better and often worse, Hilda plowed resignedly through the mud. Starting from the slab in Kansas at seven minutes after eleven, Mountain Time, the fugitives arrived nearly five hours later on the end of a long string of muddy cars. The string wound for a mile or so, ending in a knot of distant roofs and cottonwoods.

George climbed out to ask questions about it.

"Holly," said the driver of a Nebraska Studebaker. "Holly, Colorado. Don't see no cars coming through

this way, so I guess the road's out. Been here since three o'clock myself."

He climbed in again, resignedly, with clumps of mud on his feet. He shut off the motor and drew out his pipe.

"Why fret?" he said. "We aren't going anywhere. Fourth car ahead happens to be a Chrysler, Michigan license. Ho hum."

The Shanley disaster came over them like a wet blanket again. This was the beginning of the end of the Woar honeymoon.

In half an hour the waiting line increased by a score of cars; the Lagonda outstanding among them. Not so outstanding were the rest, Nick Leeds's, the Tozer Nash, and Burnet, Ray and Boyd in the Model "A."

As Katheren had gloomily predicted to herself, George wasn't content to read Gouchard's Guide through for the third time. He filled his pipe with restless fingers and proposed a stroll.

"Any particular suspect on your mind? Nick Leeds? Beardsley? Tozer . . .?"

She hadn't meant to use such a sharp tone. He didn't mean to be so infernally irritated. However:

"Beardsley, if you must know."

Mae flung open the door, embraced Katheren, and cried, "Why, it's darling Katheren! We thought for sure you folks must've drowned!"

George leaned in Alden's window like a friendly neighbor passing time of day over the back fence. He asked, "Where did you two spend last night?"

"Newton, wasn't it, Mae?"

"Yes, Newton, wasn't it, Alden?"

"Nick called up. Couldn't raise you there."

"That's funny, George. We stayed at the Ripley, didn't we, Mae?"

Mae caught the pass neatly:

"Alden calls it funny! You see, we didn't get into Newton till about dawn, and if Nick called up before then, no wonder he couldn't raise us. Where we were, they didn't know about telephones. Of course Alden *would* try to turn around and go back about five miles west of Elm Point, and naturally he ran off into the mud and got stuck. I made him go and find a farmer—didn't I, Alden?"

"And did I get bawled out?" Alden contributed. "I couldn't raise a farmer till dawn, and the little woman was sitting there all alone, waiting for me to come back!"

George pointed his pipe-stem at Mae: "Alone? You didn't happen on Cicely, then?"

Mae said, "I saw just four living things the whole night long—four jackasses. One was Alden, the other was the farmer, and the rest had long ears."

She was extremely positive about it. She added for good measure a circumstantial account of how the jackasses dragged the Chrysler out of the mire, and defied George to doubt it. At least, her eye had a sparkle of challenge in it. Before he could take her up on it, Nick came down the line of cars and grinned quizzically at them:

"Ladies and gents, I got a flat. Can't work the jack. Who'll lend a hand?"

His trousers were rolled up to his knees, his feet were bare and his toes curled in the mud. Altogether he glowed that afternoon, exuding pride, adoration and a dash of healthy animal spirits.

A flat seemed to be precisely the diversion to fill in

the long wait. Everyone gave a hand, even Smalnick and Tozer. Those who couldn't get near enough with their hands crowded up to give advice. The ladies made much of Ruth and the engagement ring Nick had bought her in Dodge City.

Not Agatha Tozer, though.

Woar went searching for a bit of plank. Agatha stalked him to the solitude of a field and confronted him with a worried, doubtful face. It was the first time in her life, he fancied, she hadn't been supremely sure of herself.

"I've been wanting to talk to you, Mr. Brendan. I gave some money to Mrs. Smalnick—a lot of money to us, it was. Connie's whole future, all my hopes and plans for her, and—anyhow, the money wasn't in her bag, and I'm terribly worried about what happened to it. So I thought I'd talk to you . . ."

"You might ask Mr. Smalnick."

"I did. But you see—he says Mrs. Smalnick wasn't his wife at all. If he hasn't got my money, who has?"

"Murderers have financial problems as well as anyone else."

"Oh, dear! You mean she was robbed, just like poor Mr. Shanley?"

"Probably."

"I simply must get that money back before Henry—well, I simply must find out who took it, that's all!"

"Dear Mrs. Tozer, we're none of us too well heeled, excepting Mr. Smalnick. He allowed Cicely to use his reputation to impose on you, therefore he's responsible. My advice is: don't let him get away from you."

From the purposeful look in her eye as she thanked him, George gathered she would take it. No fear that the Tozers would fall out of the race, anyhow.

He found the bit of plank near a tumble-down shed. He hurried back to the line of cars with it. He had reasons for not wanting to be away too long.

Katheren, watching him as she aired Caligula, could tell he had something up his sleeve. He wore an innocent, faintly ambiguous smile on such occasions.

She saw him strip off his own coat and tie and hang both over the door on the far side of Nick's car. Well, that wasn't so odd. Smalnick, Tozer and Nick himself had done the same thing. The Winter twins had left their sweatshirts there when they stripped for action.

Woar's bit of plank and a patent pneumatic jack from Beardsley's car did the trick. With nods of commendation from the dozen spectators, Nick himself tightened the spare wheel into place. Everybody looked proud and self-congratulatory. Everybody wiped hands, whether dirty or not.

Katheren had decided to keep an eye on the coats, merely on account of. She placed herself not too far away, and when the men came round the car—the line far ahead was starting up—she noticed particularly.

Smalnick came first, as if he had just remembered he was in a hurry. Tozer scurried at his heels.

These two were reaching into the pile of clothing when George removed his own coat and tie from on top. Then Nick.

Ray Kemp and the Winter twins struggled into their sweatshirts. Milton, Henry and Nick still couldn't find something and Katheren suddenly knew what. Their neckties.

She saw Tozer put on his glasses, stoop and search the running board. Simultaneously, Nick and Milton seized ends of a tie, the only remaining tie, that had been under Milton's coat.



No mistaking it, either. That tie had been Rex Shanley's once. Katheren, having had all too good a look at it in the light of George's flash on the road in Ohio, gave a faint gasp.

Henry stared at it. Nick and Milton, each with an end in his hand, stared at it. The three betrayals of recognition came late, but no weaker for the delay. The tie was hastily dropped in the mud, and Katheren then saw it had been threaded through the death's head ring.

So that was what George had been up to!

Ruth found the proper ties on the floor of the car when she climbed in from the opposite side. She handed them out the window. As casual as could be, the men laughed it off, and finished dressing. If Woar had been counting on violent reactions from anybody, he must have been disappointed.

Somebody blasted on a horn. Somebody cried, "We're off, folks!" There was a scramble of helpers and lookers-on from the vicinity of Nick's car then, and Katheren hurried down the line to the Buick. At her last look over her shoulder, the group had made off, and the solitary figure of Hazlitt Woar remained on the spot, peering about him in an attitude of keen speculation.

She had to shout for him when the Studebaker moved on and left Hilda holding up the procession. He came running at last, but not too eagerly.

"You look let down."

"I am."

"The parlor trick fizzled, didn't it? Silly performance, if you ask me."

"Which I won't, Katheren."

"Don't snap. And take that muddy haberdashery

out of your pocket and wrap it in a tissue—if you *must* keep it.”

He uttered a small, distressed sound and drove on, ignoring her completely. The muddy haberdashery wasn't in his pocket at all. Hence the distress.

He had heard the three men account for mistaking the fatal necktie momentarily for their own. Henry Tozer was far-sighted; Lefty was color-blind; Nick Leeds had been given a similar seven-fold Ancient Madder from the late Rex's effects by his darling Ruth. She had a bent for seven-folds, and habitually equipped her males with them, it seemed.

And that was something.

He had also discovered, when trampling feet had gone off and permitted him to look for it in the mud, that both fatal tie and ring had vanished practically under his own lean nose.

And that, as it turned out, was something else again!

## Fourteen

**T**he line of cars crawled ahead.

The Arkansas River had eaten a gulf out of the main street of the town. A huge oil truck and its trailer had gone over the edge. It lay up-ended on its nose, thirty feet down.

A temporary detour through somebody's garden let cars pass the scene of the disaster.

Holly was a small but lively cattle town industriously digging itself out of a deposit of reddish mud. Only in the last few hours had the river subsided from sidewalks and shops. Business as usual, however. George put in at a garage for repairs to Hilda.

Everyone else put in an appearance at the State Line Short Order Café. Nick had invited them by way of celebration of the announcement of his coming marriage. Eager, reluctant or downright unwilling (as in Milton Smalnick's case), each one had accepted, somewhat along these lines:

Nick: "Coming to my party, aren't you? Then why not?"

Guest: "It's pretty late, and I'm in a hurry . . ."

Nick: "If you don't like me, say so."

Guest: "It isn't that, Nick. It's just that . . ."

Nick: "Forget it. I'll be seeing you."

Nick, Katheren decided as she found herself in the

State Line Café along with the rest, had discovered the basic principles of being irresistible. No wonder Ruth was going to marry him. Wonder would have been if she had managed to get out of it.

The drinks were fiery and inescapable. The State Line was noisy and crowded. The assemblage laughed loud and talked at the tops of their voices, probably to cover any morbid undercurrents in the party—since by this time none of them could doubt that one of them was a murderer.

But which?

Katheren could pretend outwardly that she wasn't concerned. Inwardly, she couldn't. Her last theory, trumped up after the news of Cicely's death, was that Cicely herself had murdered Shanley (why, she didn't even guess) and had tried to murder Ruth. Failing, she had drowned herself. In that case, Ruth ought to be relieved of her long terror.

If that had occurred to any other minds, a good look at Ruth was enough to eliminate it. Cicely's death, far from having put her fears to rest, had done the contrary.

She was smiling, of course, making conversation and accepting hopes for a happy future and all that—but Katheren had never seen as much dismay, anguish and haunting dread in any eyes as in poor Ruth's.

Didn't men notice those things? Didn't Nick?

Even now, with the hideous intimidation played to its end, Katheren finds those eyes impossible to forget.

However, except for sympathetic suggestions from Connie, Agatha and Mae that Ruth get a good long rest, nobody made comment, and Nick's party began to break up. First Smalnick had to go. Then the Tozer

family, quickly followed by Ray Kemp dragging the Winter twins in his wake.

Mae nudged Katheren, luckily spilling half of Katheren's second whisky sour on the floor. Mae exclaimed, "What on earth! That isn't *your* car, is it?"

It was.

Somewhere between amusement and dismay, Katheren saw that the top had been dyed black, and a battered radiator grill meant for a Chevrolet truck had been wired over the wounded nose. The Ohio licenses had been changed for Colorado numbers.

George's way, she supposed, of giving Hilda a false beard.

"Looks like a cross between a duck and a weasel," Beardsley decided. He gave George a glass and told him to drink up.

"She may be a bit of a mongrel," said George, "but she's whole again, bless her."

"Ready for more detours," said Mae.

Nick reassured them; they would be climbing the slope of the Rockies, drained by this time of flood waters.

"It comes down fast, and it runs off fast," he told them. "You can make La Junta in about two hours—four thousand feet above sea level. We'll put up for the night there. At the Kit Carson, probably."

It seemed to be understood that the Beardsleys were in on the wedding. That couple had raised social ingratiating to the importance of a life work. They insisted on chaperoning Ruth up to the time of the ceremony, and took it for granted Alden was to give away the bride.

Katheren had sudden doubts, even as she watched Nick help Ruth tenderly into the Chrysler and kiss her

as if he was afraid he'd never see her again. Mae had insisted on the impropriety of the bride-to-be traveling alone with her intended. She was to go with the Beardsleys, therefore, and Nick follow in his own car. The strong, masterful Nick; the docile Ruth; made by nature to be protector and protected, and tremendously in love with one another . . . yet somehow Katheren couldn't quite believe the match would come off.

The Woars were last to take leave of the State Line Short Order pavilion and Holly, and George watched the two cars of the wedding party vanish up the road.

He too had a speculative, unhappy glint in his eye.

## 2

All that afternoon they climbed gradually through the alfalfa and beet farms of the Arkansas River valley. In Las Animas, they overtook the Tozers.

Shortly after sunset—the sky turned flaming red and the moon came out and the red earth turned an effulgent purple all about them—they came upon La Junta.

Beardsley's Chrysler and Leeds's Mercury stood nuzzling each other outside the Kit Carson.

Woar, for reasons of his own, asked the way to the Harvey House.

The Harvey House stands next to the railroad tracks. After all, why shouldn't it? Those two invaluable institutions of the Great Southwest, the Harvey hotel chain and the Santa Fé Railway, grew up together in the era before travelers became snooty about coal smoke and the thunder of rolling stock.

However, as Katheren mentioned, "It's not the engines. There's nothing I like better than the sound of a train whistle far away at night. But why you have to

choose a playground for switch engines and freight cars when both of us so badly need a good long sleep, I don't quite see."

George forebore to point out their room was on the south side, away from the tracks. He took Caligula for a walk, leaving Katheren to wash her hair.

He walked Caligula on the station platform, particularly in the vicinity of the telegraph office. Not because it was the place for strolling in La Junta, but because telegraph offices interested him. People had a way of turning up at them in times of stress.

He bought tobacco from the newsstand and picture postcards to send his sister in England (after all, it was some three years since he'd written last) before he had any luck. Then Lefty turned up.

He leaned over the counter, scribbled a short message, and offered a five-dollar bill from a well-filled note case. He seemed nervous, even furtive. Woar saw the reason, even before he could see the amount of change spread out on the counter by the telegraphist. The amount of change would give George a basis for computing how far away, and so to what city, the telegram was sent. The reason for Lefty's nervousness gave him another kind of advantage.

It was Agatha Tozer.

With Connie in tow, she had been looking for Lefty, and not too patiently. She burst in upon him, and Woar, from the semi-darkness of the station outside, saw the man flinch.

He caught some of the tirade:

". . . And tell me frankly if you don't think she deserves the chance. Gifted . . . Beautiful . . . Connie, just recite that piece from *Hamlet* for Mr. Smalnick. . . ."

Connie would not oblige. She made a wry face, applied herself to an ice-cream cone and drifted out to the platform. Her mother seized Lefty's sleeve, as if afraid he too might run away. . . .

It was an opportunity. George, almost despairing of a Connie without Agatha or Ray Kemp attached, seized it. He came to her elbow and asked her, "You loathe the idea of Hollywood, don't you?"

After a long look at him, Connie nodded.

"I wish before people made sacrifices," she said, "they'd consult me."

"I'd like to consult you, Connie, but your ice-cream wants licking."

"Did it drip on me?"

"You caught it in time. Let's walk along the platform. I wonder. Are you going to want to tell me about that night at Migler's?"

"No."

"Um. Of course. More or less," Woar admitted, "what I expected."

They walked on in silence under a sky of clear, luminous blue. The station lights made little islands of pale yellow. A train came in magnificently, a long row of brilliant windows over their heads and an engine panting gently.

Woar understood that he was playing God with the Tozers. One of the occupational risks in his profession. He knew that Henry's dream, the trailer and the roving life, had been sacrificed forever, and that Agatha's ambition for Connie was equally and hopelessly lost by now. The little family in their Nash were running headlong towards a further sacrifice, for which Connie would be paying; that is, unless Woar prevented it.

How?



Well, he couldn't brood on it forever. Connie had finished her cone.

"Your mother doesn't know?"

"About what? Oh, the thing at Migler's. No, she doesn't. Daddy wouldn't let me tell her."

Connie hesitated, gave indications of wanting to turn back.

"Let me ask a few more questions."

"Go ahead, then."

"Did your father kill Rex Shanley?"

"That's not a question, it's a—a lie."

"Did Ray kill him?"

"I'm not going to say a word."

"Naturally. However, if it comes to a choice between one or the other, which would you prefer to take the blame?"

She looked up into the sky, and her face was superbly miserable. Woor felt the same way about it.

"Connie, I shan't hurt any of you unless in sheer ignorance. Your father can't tell me anything, Ray can't tell me anything, because they're shielding you. It may cost both of them their freedom, even their lives. If you really want to help them, out with it—now."

She took a moment to think about it. Agatha and Lefty stood talking together outside the telegraph office, and Connie glanced at them once. Then she said:

"Daddy thinks you're a wormy gent. I think he's wrong. I'll get the dickens for this—but I never could see what's so grim about it, anyhow. All that happened was that Shanley was terribly drunk that night at Migler's, and he tried to grab me when I was coming out of the ladies' wash room. I couldn't get away from him, so I yelled. Ray came, and Daddy came too. By the time he got there, Ray finished up Shanley with a beau-

tiful crack on the jaw—and that was about all. Daddy has ideas about smirching a young girl's honor and all that, so we promised not to say anything."

"And Shanley?"

"He was flat on his back in the mud, out like a light. He couldn't promise anything."

"What did they do with him?"

"Daddy was all for killing him on the spot, and so was Ray, which was like men, wasn't it? Ray picked him up, I think, and carried him over to the Shanley cabin. Ruth wouldn't have him inside, so I think they stuck him in his car to sleep it off. I don't know exactly. Daddy made me go back to the trailer."

"Ray hurt his hand?"

"He cut it on poor Shanley's teeth."

"And that's all you know?"

"I did go back and explain to Ruth that her husband had been in a fight. I thought she ought to know. She was too upset already, I guess, to upset any more. There's mother looking for me, Mr. Brendan. Except that Daddy and Ray weren't silly enough really to hurt Mr. Shanley—you can understand that, can't you?—that's all I know. We're staying at the Tourist Court tonight, if you want to talk to Daddy. Darn mother, she'll think I'm kidnaped or something if I don't catch her. . . ."

## 3

George was upstairs peacefully shaving when the consequence occurred. He had drawn a hot bath. The long train had hooted and begun to pull out of the station. Katheren was drying her hair at the window, finding that it dried miraculously at that altitude, when there was an imperative knock at the door.

She wasn't dressed to receive visitors, and she told Henry Tozer so through a narrow opening in the door. He was in no mood to listen, though. He shouldered his way in.

"Where's your husband?" he demanded. His face was dark with wrath.

When Woar, naked but for a bath towel round his waist, appeared in the bathroom door, Tozer charged.

He swung his fists wildly, like a man not in the habit of brawls. He made up his lack of skill in passion, intense concentration on the job of hurting Woar. When Katheren got over her surprise, the two were waltzing and grunting in a clinch. Suddenly they both fell to the floor.

George fell on top. He squatted on Henry's legs and pinned his arms to the carpet in a wrestler's hold. They both panted for breath.

Then George said, "If you've worked it off . . ."

"Sneaky, dirty Englishman!" Henry spat the words like a damp firework. "Snooping into what don't concern you—"

"Oh? We'd better wait."

He knelt on Henry till all the bitterness came out, a matter of several minutes. Tozer's face gradually lost its flush, his eyes their fight. Woar got up from him, knotted the towel tighter, and helped his enemy to his feet.

"Care for a drink of water?"

"No."

"Do you mind coming in the bathroom while I finish shaving? We might as well get this straight, now we're started on the subject."

Woar shut the bathroom door after them, and Katheren heard no more. Henry sat on the edge of the tub

in a tired way. He gazed at Woar as if he were a scorpion come to light in his bedroom slippers.

"Not that I blame you greatly," Woar admitted as he lathered his chin with fresh soap. "I've been a worry to you from the beginning. Well, shall we let down our hair?"

"All I came here for is to see you leave Connie alone."

"Granted."

"You've been pumping her, tricking her—"

"Granted, granted. Let's get on."

Henry's wrath had entirely cooled now, and he cocked a sharp eye at Woar's shoulder blades.

"Tell me something, Brendan—just how much do you think you know about us?"

"I think I know you and Kemp had a strong inclination to murder Rex Shanley, if not strong reason. Well, perhaps a chivalrous reason, though not a logical one. He attacked Connie. You and Ray lugged him off the field of battle. Later, you repaired Ray's wounds, and between the two of you swore the Winter twins to secrecy. Subsequently the lot of you took pains to hide Shanley's murder from the police—and from me. Do I know enough?"

Henry leaned his elbows on his knees, thought deeply and forgot to answer.

"If you'd like more, I submit that the necktie with which Shanley was finally strangled was removed from the corpse—"

"I didn't do that, I told you!"

"And later given to me in Plainfield, Indiana, by none other than yourself."

"I told you, somebody put it in my car!"

"Why?"

"To make trouble for me."

"Who?"

"Maybe it was—how do I know?"

Wear scraped at his beard and watched Tozer's reflection in the mirror. Then he ran water over his razor, dried it and pointed it at him:

"Lame, that bit about somebody making trouble for you. Not a story that would convince the police. Shall we put it up to them, just as it stands, or do you want to confide the rest in me?"

"What would the police do to me?"

"That's their affair, not mine."

"I'm Connie's father. They'd take that into consideration, wouldn't they?"

"Probably."

"Justifiable homicide, they call it, don't they, when a man takes justice in his own hands in trouble like that?"

"I think so."

"All right, if you want to know, I did kill Rex Shanley. I choked him with his necktie, and I ran him off in his car and left it in gear and jumped out so it would look like an accident. There you are, there's my confession. Go ahead and use it."

"Thanks. But why did you have to kill Cicely?"

"I—she—I didn't kill her. She drowned herself."

"Tozer, Tozer, don't be such an ass!"

"Huh?"

"You assume it's a choice between you and Ray Kemp. You like the boy. You think he's the murderer. You want to save him from conviction. So you confess. Don't you see, man, that you're telling me you don't know who killed Shanley, but you believe it's Ray?"

"A confession is a confession, Brendan!"

"Not at all. It's merely more evidence."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"Send you home to your tourist court before you make any more of your atrocious sacrifices. In Heaven's name, don't confess to anybody else, or Ray's as good as hanged. Now let me in my bath. I need it. . . ."

And so another suspect was eliminated from the Shanley case.

## Fifteen

Next on his list were Nick Leeds, trouble-shooter for a trucking line, and Ray Kemp, fairly celebrated as a football player. If either chose to be as tough with Woar as Henry Tozer . . .

He decided on Nick Leeds and rummaged for a shirt.

"Even a brilliant criminal investigator," he told Katheren, "must some day run up against the insoluble problem of clean linen on a trip like this."

She wasn't amused. They went down to dinner in a silence that might not be called strained so much as gritty. After all, a comparative stranger breaking in on a woman when she's trying to dry her hair!

Her head was done up in a scarf. Since this was the Wild West—she had noticed a piebald pony tethered in front of a saloon on the outskirts of La Junta that evening—she wore linen culottes, a sweater and a tweed jacket. She was to wear them for a long time to come, as a matter of fact.

George stepped out into the street to get the maps from the car. With several others, it stood parked in front of the hotel.

"Do we leave Hilda out all night?"

"Seems customary," said Woar. "The garage idea may be considered effete in Colorado, for all we know. Let's not do anything to make a show of ourselves."

He wound up the windows and locked the doors, which satisfied Katheren on that score, at least. He also locked the patent cap he had bought for the gas tank.

The Lagonda had departed, probably intending to climb the eighty-four miles to Trinidad that night.

That pleased her somewhat. By concidence that looked like prearranged plan, or plan disguised as coincidence, all the cars from Migler's had a way of coming together every so often. She dreaded that conjunction by this time, feared the night of horrors entailed. But tonight there wasn't one of them in sight.

She began to think the Woars might take in a movie, after a quiet dinner together, and go to bed early. They were both frazzled from lack of sleep.

After dinner, which George snapped down like a famished hawk, he jumped to his feet. She hadn't touched her dessert yet.

"Are we in a hurry, George?"

"I am. You aren't. Finish your dinner in peace. And don't wait up for me. I may be late."

"Where are you going?"

"To the Kit Carson to see Nick Leeds."

She tried not to show her disappointment. She murmured a remote, "Oh."

But for all his impatience, he stood over the table, looking down at her with intensity.

"Have I something on my chin?" she asked.

"Oh, my aunt's sacred hat!" With peculiar gravity he added, "Take care of yourself, will you? Don't let yourself be surprised."

He turned on his heel and fled.



Alone, she ate her ice-cream slowly.

Somewhere in the distance a siren screamed, gradually more remote till it died away. Always an eery and alarming wail, it caused creepiness along her spine.

She was a very sensible woman, however. She continued eating ice-cream, and even drank another cup of coffee. Probably someone's barn on fire, or a motor accident somewhere. Such things happened.

She paid for the dinner. She strolled out on the station platform, where she bought a tube of tooth-paste at the magazine stand, just before its lights darkened and it closed for the night. At the same time, a freight train rattled through on the east-bound line. The red lanterns and the bright window of the caboose dwindled into the dark hills, leaving in Katheren a feeling of utter desertion.

The prospect of reading herself to sleep in a hotel bedroom did not appeal. Hotel bedrooms, even the most sumptuous, would remind her of the Excelsior in Elm Point for some time to come. A picture show, then, or a bout of window shopping?

She decided on the last. She released Caligula from the linen closet allotted him by the management, and took him along for company.

"If Mr. Brendan comes in before I do," she told the clerk, "say I've just gone for a walk."

"Yes, mam. There's a telegram for him, too."

"A telegram?"

"Yes, mam."

"May I have it?"

"If you'll just sign for it."

She signed for it and tore it open, assuring herself that a telegram for a fictitious George Brendan was odd enough to justify the deed.

She read:

GEORGE BRENDAN  
HARVEY HOUSE  
LA JUNTA, COLO.  
RE YOUR INQUIRY MISSING PERSON NAMED CICELY  
CAN YOU FURTHER IDENTIFY? HEREBY AUTHORIZE  
ELZA WHITT TO TAKE YOUR DEPOSITION

HAL G. ROARER  
SHERIFF CLARION COUNTY  
CLARION, KANSAS

Unless he had gone completely out of his head, George would be the last man in the world to inquire about Cicely. Katheren suspected a new kind of trap.

She made a fair guess at the truth while she stood there. Somebody had wired Kansas. That somebody had used George's name to sign the wire. And with malice aforethought, to start exactly the chain of official action that would ultimately bind Hazlitt Woar to the murder back in Elm Point.

The mildness of Hal G. Roarer's message was probably intended not to frighten the Woars away—either that, or Roarer was ignorant of what the constable knew in Elm Point. In any case, it had an opposite effect. She was instantly inclined to run like the devil.

"Who is Elza Whitt?" asked Katheren as she folded the telegram into her bag.

The clerk said, "He's our Chief of Police here."

"Oh."

"If there's anything I can do for you, Mrs. Brendan . . ."

"Not a thing, thanks just the same," said Katheren with what she hoped would come out a friendly smile.

She snapped the lead on Caligula and led him away.

She paused outside the hotel door, where the row of cars stood parked.

On the spot where George had locked Hilda for the night, there was a tramp of a travel-stained Essex with Arizona license plates. George, then, had driven to the Kit Carson. She must walk. She set out as fast as Caligula's short legs would carry him.

Taking Caligula into the Kit Carson with her would probably be resented by the management. She thought to lock him in the Buick, therefore, while she was inside.

She looked along the row of cars. She saw the Beardsleys' Chrysler and Leeds's Mercury rubbing elbows as before; and flanking them now on each side five or six other cars, ranging from an Austin to a large and dignified Pierce. One very new Buick sedan, but no last year's model convertible.

She hurried to the corner.

She explored every near-by street and alley, and the public garage.

No Hilda.

Regardless of the night clerk's frown at Caligula, Katheren braved the lobby:

"Will you ring Mr. Leeds's room?"

"He isn't in, madam," said the night clerk, primly adjusting his tie.

"Ring anyhow.

"Very well, madam."

He rang. She could hear the intermittent buzz from the telephone. He hung up and told her:

"Mr. Leeds went out to the movies with some other

people, and he hasn't come back yet. You can believe me."

If George had gone to the movies without her!

She felt more relieved than alarmed when she ran head-on into Nick Leeds and Ruth in the doorway. Mae and Alden Beardsley trailed after them.

"George? We haven't seen him all evening."

"Don't tell us," said Mae, "that you lost your bridegroom right in the middle of the honeymoon!"

"That," said Alden, "is darn near as queer as the picture we saw."

She evaded Beardsley's paternal insistence on driving her down to the Harvey House. She walked, and fearfully. If George wasn't there, she didn't know what she'd do.

The clerk seemed to be waiting for her, holding the door open for her.

"You haven't seen my husband, have—"

He was already shaking his head, before she could finish her question. And another man in a brown serge suit was at her elbow, interrupting her. She knew then that the trap had sprung. She could tell by sheer instinct that the Elm Point murder was out.

"Mrs. Brendan?"

"Yes."

"I'm Elza Whitt. Can I speak to you a minute?"

Elza had a mild, low voice. He had immensely bulky shoulders and shrewd eyes, which made the mild voice seem to mean much more than it said. He wanted to know where her husband was.

"That's exactly what I'm trying to find out myself. I'm worried about him. I thought you might have—well, it seems you haven't. Our car's missing too."

"Buick convertible, Colorado plates, kind of a funny front on it?"

"Yes. Where?"

A slow smile restricted to the right half of Elza's mouth warned her. She felt a sickening premonition, an unsteadiness in her knees.

"Well," she heard him drawl, "I'd of been here a lot earlier, Mrs. Brendan, if I hadn't of been two miles out on the Raton road seein' what's left of that Buick car of yours. She's run off the road and burned up."

Katheren suddenly had to sit down. Elza and the clerk perceived, and helped her.

She put her hand on Caligula's back. That was instinctive, and for no sensible reason. Then she straightened up and lighted a cigarette from the flame of Elza's immense brass briquet.

"Wasn't anybody in it, Mrs. Brendan."

"I suppose you looked—everywhere?"

"That's right, Mrs. Brendan. We looked."

"I can't help thinking—you know . . ."

"Give you my word, Mrs. Brendan, as far as I know your husband's all right."

"Thank you. Do you mind if I sit here a minute?"

"You take your time."

She finished her cigarette. She conquered her imagination and what it cooked up for her. She made herself remember that George must be alive, and counting on her to keep her wits about her.

So she stood up at last and said to the patient Elza, "You wanted to talk to me. Does that mean I'm under arrest or anything?"

Elza nodded. He took off his broad-brimmed Stetson, which left a permanent crease on his forehead. He crossed his legs and rolled a cigarette.

"I see," said Katheren. "Why?"

"Woman got herself murdered back in Elm Point, Kansas."

"You don't think I'm responsible, do you?"

"Mrs. Brendan, I ain't paid to think about you. I got a wire to hold you and your husband."

"Then it's really my husband you want, and not me?"

"No. Both of you, so you might as well sit down comfortable and wait."

"Wait for my husband to come back, you mean?"

He nodded.

Katheren instantly turned her back on him and hurried Caligula across the lobby. Elza Whitt, for all his bulk, moved quickly. He placed a large, heavy hand under her arm and held her.

"You can't go out, Mrs. Brendan. You might as well just sit down and wait."

"My dear Mr. Whitt—but after all!"

She gave him an arch, whimsical glance, meant to be as disarming as possible. She turned the glance towards a door bearing an enameled sign, *Ladies*.

Elza withdrew his hand and scratched his head with it. He looked at the hotel clerk, who was grinning to himself.

"Sure. All right. I guess you can go ahead."

"I shan't be very long," said Katheren, and went ahead.

Elza leaned against one of the pillars near by, where he could watch the door.

## Sixteen

After the usual good nights in an upstairs corridor of the Kit Carson, Alden Beardsley went yawning into his own room and shut the door. Mae said, "I'll check up in case anybody's hiding under the bed," and went into the room she was sharing with Ruth. She also shut the door. This was tact.

Nick put his arms tenderly about Ruth as soon as they were alone and said, "Ruth honey, there's nothing to be scared about. You get yourself some sleep, and then it'll be tomorrow, and that's the big day for us. See?"

She hid her face against his shoulder. She held him tightly, almost frantically.

"There's nothing to be scared about," he repeated.

"Can't we wait, Nick?"

"Not if you really love me, honey."

"I just don't think it's right."

"You let me do the thinking," said Nick, and kissed her.

From the doorway, Mae's voice called, "That's enough now, children. Ruth, you come to bed."

Nick released her and watched her into her room. He heard the door close and the bolt slide in the lock.

He threw open the door of his own room then, and saw the comfortably supine figure of Hazlitt G. B. Woar

stretched out on his bed, smoking a pipe and looking up with polite interest from the open pages of a Bible.

"Come in," said Woar softly, "and shut the door."

"What's the idea, Brendan?"

Nick seemed not to know whether to be amused or resentful, and his visitor refused to decide the question for him. He said, "Your telephone rang once. I'm afraid I used up all your matches. If there's room at the foot of the bed, sit down. Or get undressed if you prefer. I shan't stay long."

Nick took off his coat and growled, "What do you want? It's late."

"As late for me as for you. I want to know whether or not Ruth signed that insurance waiver."

"What brought this up?"

"Did she?"

Nick began stripping himself, flinging his clothes disgustedly towards a chair. He said, "No, she didn't."

"And the claim?"

"She didn't sign that either, as far as I know."

"Good."

"What's good about it?"

"Ask her. Ask her why she's afraid to claim her husband's insurance, or to give up her claim. She might tell you."

Woar had an unbroken view of Nick's back. He was shrugging into his pajama jacket. He paused, his bare shoulder muscles hardened in the lamplight, but he said nothing. Perhaps he had asked already—and not been told.

"There's much to be said for long engagements," Woar mused.

"Listen, George—I know what it's all about. I don't need advice."



"Oh. Cicely counted on meeting you in St. Louis, and you stood her up. Do you know what *that* was all about?"

"No."

"Not interested in Cicely?"

"That bum?"

"Seductive, nevertheless."

"She put on the big act for me, I wasn't having any and I told her so. Get off the bed, will you? I'm tired."

The springs groaned under Nick's weight as he thrust his legs under the covers. He closed his eyes. He abandoned Woar, or seemed to.

By the time Woar had fished matches out of Nick's coat pocket and lighted his pipe, though, Nick's eyes had opened again and his forehead wrinkled in a deep frown:

"I *don't* know what it's all about, George, and that's the trouble. I'm just kidding myself when I say I do. Tell me something, will you?"

"Umhhh. If possible."

"Why was Rex Shanley bumped off?"

"Not *who* bumped him off," George remarked, "but *why*."

"I don't care who did it, but I'd like to know why. I'd like to know what it means to Ruth. It won't make any difference with me, you understand—I'd just like to know."

Woar said, "I'd like to tell you. I can't. The best I can offer is a classic crime pattern or two—well, three, in fact. They're all I have left at the moment."

Nick eyes remained open, and Woar continued:

"First, there's the murder of the man who knows too much. 'A' is aware of some dangerous or discreditable secret in the life of a prominent personage, 'B.'

'A' threatens to blab about 'B' and 'B' to stop his tongue kills 'A.' Care for that one?"

"You mean Smalnick killed Shanley?"

"I don't mean anything."

"He's prominent, Smalnick is. The rest of us aren't."

"Try the second then, the old insurance fraud. 'A' takes out a policy on the life of 'B,' kills 'B' and reaps the reward as beneficiary. Is that better?"

"Ruth didn't take out the insurance on her husband and she didn't kill him."

"Proof?"

"I don't need any, George. I know."

"Well, here's the third and last possibility. 'A' in this case is a man, usually a young one, and 'B' an attractive or wealthy woman married to the outworn, unloveable blighter, 'C.' 'C' stands in the way of the marriage of 'A' and 'B.' 'A' or 'A' and 'B' in cahoots murder the old duffer 'C' to get him out of the way."

"I'm the guy you mean by 'A'?"

"Who else?"

"You're crazy. You and your crime patterns!"

"I take it you prefer the first. You think Smalnick murdered Rex Shanley, murdered Cicely, and would like very much to murder Ruth, in case she knows his secret too."

"Don't you?"

Woar smiled wryly. "Milton Smalnick isn't as prominent as you'd think."

"Then it's got to be one of the other two? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Since you're the man who's going to marry Mrs. Shanley tomorrow, you have closer access to the truth than I have. You'll have to make up your mind, Nick. I'm sorry I can't—"

He interrupted himself. He heard a very faint, very cautious tapping on the door. He unlocked it, opened it a narrow crack and peered into the corridor.

His wife stood outside. She carried Caligula in her arms. She had a smudge on her forehead and the bridge of her nose. She beckoned.

"Katheren!"

"I hate to bother you, George," she whispered, "but I think we're leaving."

He turned to Nick, who had pulled himself up from the bed and stood over his heaped clothes, rummaging for a cigarette.

"Sorry I can't help you with your problem," said Woar, "but we seem to be leaving. You might as well go to bed and sleep on it."

Nick's handsome face looked outraged.

"Sleep? How the hell do you expect me to sleep?"

## 2

Katheren showed her husband the way down the back stairs and out by the service door. She let him read the telegram from Kansas en route.

"You're right," he told her. "It's our old friend who sugars the gasoline. Did you bring Hilda?"

"Hilda was stolen, wrecked and burned up. Your old friend ran out of sugar, it seems."

"My old friend? The devil means business, doesn't he? He lets Kansas know where we are, then destroys our usual means of escape. She was a nice car, wasn't she? Wipe the dirt from your nose."

Then she told him how she crawled through the window screen to get out of the ladies' room; a very small window, very dirty and very high, the worst kind

to haul Caligula through, not to speak of herself and her stockings.

"Elza's probably found out long ago. I hunted everywhere for you before I went back to Nick's room again. We can't go back to the station, we can't go to the hotel, and we can't wander around the streets. Elza must have all the police in town out looking for us by now."

George held his wife in the shadow of the doorway while solitary footsteps marched past along the pavement. Not one of Elza Whitt's tribe, but a man wearing overalls and swinging an empty dinner pail. He went on.

"Follow me," George whispered, "at a distance of about a hundred yards. I'll lead the way. If I'm stopped by anybody with a badge, run like a rabbit for the best lawyer you can find."

"But our luggage is—"

"Damn the luggage, my dear. We're lucky to have our skins."

He led her deviously through dark and empty streets. At a distance of a hundred yards, he said. She had to run every little way to keep from losing him entirely, and Caligula puffed like a grampus.

La Junta was ransacked for them that night. Their only contact with the search, however, was the time a police car cruised slowly through a neglected road—they had reached the sparsely settled suburbs—and flashed a spotlight about. Woar threw himself flat beside a hedge. Katheren dove into a bed of moribund tomato plants and hugged Caligula in her arms, while the spot played straight in her blinded eyes and her heart fluttered wildly.

But she wasn't seen. The car cruised on.

At last, when her feet were sore and time and dis-

tance past reckoning, she saw the slender figure of her husband stop in the glare of an isolated all-night service station.

He beckoned with a movement of his head.

If he was tired, he never showed it. But a look of concern crossed his face as she stumbled into the light. He sat her on a bench by the gasoline pumps, a bench evidently intended for the horse-shoe-pitching gentry of the neighborhood. Fortunately, nobody was pitching horse-shoes at that time of night.

"Poor girl," he reproved himself, "you look dragged through a knot-hole. I *am* a beast!"

"Aren't you, though," she said, and automatically made repairs to her face. "Where are we now?"

He drew Gouchard's Guide out of his pocket, folded it back to a map of Colorado and New Mexico.

"About here," and his finger pointed to a place on a red line some two miles out of the red star marked La Junta. "We're going to try our luck hitch-hiking. Timpas, Delhi, Wormington, Tyrone and Trinidad. From Trinidad, we go through Raton Pass, branch off on Eighty-Five to Las Vegas and so to Santa Fé—"

"Wait a minute, George. Up here, Route Fifty. Why not go that way? See, there's Pueblo, Grand Junction and so on to Salt Lake City, Utah. Everybody thinks we're going to Santa Fé, so why not fool them and go to Salt Lake? We might be able to get *there* without being pinched, don't you think?"

"But, Katheren!"

"But what?"

Their eyes met over the map.

He smiled a conciliating smile, and asked her as if she were a child, "You don't want to miss the wedding, do you?"

"I particularly insist on missing the wedding."

"And let poor Hilda go unavenged? I was attached to that car. I loved her like a close friend. So did you, I thought. She's been run off the road and set afire, which isn't nice, is it?"

"You want to catch whoever did it, and I don't want to see the wretch again. We've had enough trouble to satisfy me for the rest of my life, George."

He let the conciliating smile fade away. He tightened his lips, nibbled on his mustache and acquired that oddly taut, resilient look she well knew—as if, she once had informed him, he stretched himself like a rubber band.

No doubt at all, he was close to the quarry now, near the end of the run. If he saw only that aspect, she saw only the other—his quarry turning on him and destroying him with the same ruthless hand that had destroyed their peace, their honeymoon and their Buick.

She said:

"I'm tired, George. I'm cross. I'm not fit to argue with you. I won't go to Santa Fé with you under any circumstances, and that's final."

"I see."

"We're going to Salt Lake City. I say we. I should say, '*I'm* going to Salt Lake City.'"

"I can't leave you on the Colorado prairie in the middle of the night, Katheren."

"Very well, then come along with me. Find us a lift."

"If I must."

"*Not* to Santa Fé?"

"Right. *Not* to Santa Fé."

The service station was one of those typical oases of the Southwest—a shack with a bar and a kitchen where

truck-drivers stopped for coffee and fuel, and others stopped for juke-box music and conversation to lighten the monotony of long night vigils at the wheel.

Three cars—a battered, empty truck, a cheap sedan and a dusty station-wagon full of surveying paraphernalia—stood parked in the range of light. Music and voices came from inside the shack.

Woar helped Katheren up from the bench. He was moody, miserable in defeat. He said, "You're cold. You need something hot to drink. I'm sorry, Katheren, and I don't blame you in the least."

In the warmth of the shack, she could hardly keep awake, though the coffee was strong and she drank two cups. The truck was bound for Buttes, to the north; and the sedan lived in La Junta. The young and sun-burned surveyor was a little drunk, because a girl in Walsenburg, apparently, had firmly rejected his love.

George's chances of getting a lift for them at that time of night seemed hopeless. However, he began sounding out the woman who ran the place. . . .

Somehow, all the sleepless nights caught up with Katheren at once. She hardly remembers putting her head on the oil-cloth covered table where she found it when she woke up.

## 3

She remembers being lifted and helped out into the cold air. George made her a narrow bed on the floor of the station-wagon. She accepted it with gratitude.

"Salt Lake City?"

"Yes, my dear. Go to sleep."

The sodden surveyor and his disappointment in love sat in the front seat beside Woar, who drove. For a long time, Katheren swayed and bounced between Caligula

and a tripod. She had a smelly blanket to pull about her, and a rain-coat wadded up under her head.

It was in the early morning, in a cold, dark city she gathered was Pueblo, that they changed from the station-wagon to the cab of a huge diesel truck loaded with horses. From there on, she had to sleep sitting up, wedged between the driver and Woar, whose shoulder made an acceptable pillow. Nevertheless, she slept. The truck rumbled, the horses stamped, and the seat was hard, but Katheren slept.

She was vaguely aware of a few stops, and the gradual change from darkness to daylight.

Mercifully enough, she remained in that coma of exhaustion till the sun was well up in the sky and the green hills and mountains had gathered about her. Horribly seedy but able to cope with life, she sat up and took stock.

They should be about a thousand miles from Los Angeles, she supposed. About seven hundred miles from the California State Line. If they took the train from Salt Lake City, they could make the coast in about a day.

Once there, she could wire for money, revel in new clothes, baths, beds, and the exquisite luxury of staying in one place as long as she liked. . . .

The truck was making speed. It squawked its horn at a road-hog.

The road-hog reluctantly made room and they passed.

He was Milton J. Smalnick in the travel-stained Lagonda.

"Can't get hung up behind those babies," the truck-driver said. "I keep up an average. Pull into Fé at two o'clock, right on the dot."



"*Santa Fé?*"

"Yes, mam."

"Oh."

George looked out the window and sighed. After a long time, he cautiously turned his head enough to see how she was taking it.

"I'm awfully sorry, Katheren. I'm awfully sorry."

"Don't mention it."

"I couldn't help myself. I hope you'll—"

"Forgive and forget, I suppose?"

"Yes. It won't happen again."

Katheren thought for a minute or so, and rejected a dozen remarks to say as unsuitable to the ears of a truck-driver. What could she do about it, except smile?

She smiled, and said, "No. It better not."

## Seventeen

Santa Fé, capital of New Mexico, is an anachronism. It belongs to a gentler, gayer civilization, to a more heroic age. Katheren, at first sight of its streets and houses, thought it must be unreal, a gracious, heart-warming mistake. . . .

They pulled in at two, as scheduled, in time for the last act of the tragedy of Ruth Shanley.

While they were coming in on College Street, the Lagonda whisked by and vanished up ahead. Either Smalnick was one of those emotional drivers who look upon being passed as a slur on their cars, Katheren thought, or he'd been held up by motor trouble on the way. Motor trouble, it proved later.

The Beardsleys, Ruth and Nick?

Woar found the cars parked diagonally across the Plaza from the Governor's Palace. The wedding party, then, had put up at La Fonda.

La Fonda, most attractive of all Harvey Houses, welcomed in Katheren without question—dirty face, dirty husband, lack of luggage and all. It welcomed her with a pleasant, rose-colored room complete with hand-carved bed and a saint's picture in a lacy tin frame over the desk. And a bath.

She bathed. She scrubbed the dirty face and brushed her teeth and so on till she felt better. George, who had

stayed downstairs, sent up a double dry martini. She found after it that she was able to look upon the man with tolerance and fair objectivity.

She was even amused when she came downstairs and found him waiting for her. He was obviously at a loss what to expect from her, other than the worst.

The wedding, she gathered, was about to take place immediately.

Mae and Alden Beardsley, Ruth and Nick, were celebrating in the bar. They had been celebrating for some time. Alden's face was ruddy, Mae's twinkling dazzled. Alden whooped with loud delight at the Woars.

Mae waved the marriage license like a flag, then passed it to the newcomers for them to marvel over.

"It's really going to happen, then?" asked Katheren.

"I'd like to see them try to get out of it," boomed Alden.

He banged the bar till his curly hair danced, and roared with gusty laughter at everything he said.

"We know where you can buy old shoes by the bale," cried Mae, and winked and twinkled.

"And rice," her husband bellowed. "Mustn't forget the rice. Maybe there's rice pudding on the menu, eh?"

The Tozers appeared bashfully in the doorway near the end of Woar's round of drinks. Connie and her father wished the couple well, then stood aloof, as if they found the festivities embarrassing. Agatha, though, kissed the bride-to-be, a slightly misplaced smack between nose and eye.

"We couldn't miss this chance to wish you all the happiness in the world—and we brought you something. Nothing, really. Connie saw it in a shop in the Plaza and said, 'Isn't that cute? . . .'"

Connie wrinkled her nose, conveying that she hadn't said anything of the sort.

The gift was a gimcrack bracelet strung with a battered penny and a shiny new one, a Mexican penny and a disc of blue stone. Ruth admired it gravely, a little puzzled by it.

"You must wear it for luck," insisted Agatha. "It's what every bride has to have. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. Isn't that clever?"

"Yes."

"And you'll let us come to the ceremony, won't you? We came this way on purpose not to miss it."

Alden announced, "Of course you'll come! More the merrier. Make it a real big affair. We're all going out to a little Indian chapel on the Taos road, where the minister said he'd be waiting at three. Fifteen minutes ago, that was. Then we're coming back for the wedding breakfast—dinner it'll really be, won't it?—and that's when the honeymoon begins. What happens then isn't up to me, you'll have to ask Nick about that."

Mae was insisting, "Ruth really must go up and change her clothes. We'll leave in, say, ten minutes. Is that time enough, dear?"

Ruth nodded, and obediently rose.

She looked glowingly lovely, and Katheren remembers her so. From the drinks or the excitement, her usually pale cheeks had become warm and pink. The depths of her eyes seemed to be full of happiness. She kissed Nick.

"Five's enough," she said. "Do you think I want to hold things up? Excuse me."

As she turned away, an inaudible voice seemed to speak to her, reminding her of her fear. There was a

look of blank pain. Slowly the flush and the happiness died out. However, only Hazlitt Woar noticed the change, and when he started to follow her, Alden called him back.

"Now, now, George! Where do you think you're going?"

Ruth Shanley went upstairs alone.

Then there was the usual spate of gabble, opinions of marrying weather, gasoline mileage, the state of the roads, and whether the Cathedral or the Art Museum was better worth half an hour of a tourist's time.

The Winter twins and Ray Kemp had fallen upon unlucky hours with some retread tires—that was why they wouldn't make it in time for the wedding. Well, retreads are false economy. . . . And Agatha was pursuing a line of inquiry about Smalnick—was he in Santa Fé? Had he left for Albuquerque yet? Still hot on the trail of that phantom career of Connie's, Agatha drank two Manhattans without being aware of it. One of them happened to be Nick's.

Nick's mind had gone upstairs with Ruth. He seemed hardly aware of what was happening about him.

It was Nick who looked at his watch, pointed out that twenty minutes had passed.

"Do you think she's all right?"

In five minutes more, Mae began to wonder too.

"I'd better run up and see."

They were drifting out into the patio garden, not too worried, not quite easy.

Alden said, "I'll never forget the day I married Mae—she was wearing a bustle and it busted. Say, if Ruth wants her bustle pumped up, I'm just the man—"

That went uncomfortably flat.

Mae disappeared into the elevator that goes up from

a corner of the patio, and for several minutes they stared at the shut door—till it opened again when the cage came down empty.

Another ten minutes went by. Nick lost what was left of his composure, accidentally set fire to a whole box of matches, cursed and began pacing the garden like a caged bison.

"Listen, I'm going to call her room and see what's up!"

"Call the chapel, too," Beardsley cried after him, "and tell the minister not to light the candles yet!"

Beardsley then thought he'd better gas up his car and bring it round to the door. They couldn't hold things up much longer.

"I don't get any answer," murmured an anxious Nick when he came back from the phone. "I'll run up and see if she's in her room. . . ."

They all went up, all but Connie and Henry.

They found Mae in the hall:

"Her room's locked," she told them, "and there's nobody in it. Anyhow, I knocked and couldn't get an answer. I've been hunting everywhere, thinking perhaps—"

"Perhaps what?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine."

She was trying to conceal her nervousness.

While the little group huddled there, knocking and listening with their ears to the panel for sounds, George drew the chambermaid out of the linen cupboard.

"Did you see Mrs. Shanley go into her room?"

Yes, she saw Mrs. Shanley go in. No, she didn't see Mrs. Shanley come out. Anyone else go in or out? No, nobody else even came through the hall, except the

little lady with the bright smile—Mrs. Beardsley. “Was there something wrong?”

“You might take Mrs. Shanley some fresh towels,” Woar suggested, “and find out.”

The chambermaid’s pass key unlocked the door, but heavy obstructions within kept it from opening. Nick and Woar used their shoulders.

“*Please go away!*” implored a dry, hoarse whisper. “*Please leave me alone!*”

In broad daylight, on a warm afternoon, Katheren shivered. That whisper—it was unforgettable.

Poor Ruth, what had happened to her?

She fought to keep them out, prayed for them to go away, cowered in abject terror when they had forced back the dresser and bed she had pushed up against the door. Why? There was no one in the room besides herself, nothing for her to hide, nothing for her to fear. . . .

Woar used the telephone. The switchboard clerk assured him there had been no outside calls to or from Ruth’s room, and only Nick’s one attempt, unanswered, from inside.

Woar looked out from the high window into Shelby Street, a city street, dotted with strollers and shoppers, an ordinary reassuring street lined with parked cars and shops.

And Ruth? She slumped in a chair. She gnawed at the corner of a handkerchief, but she wasn’t crying. She seemed able only to shake her head to the questions they asked her, and stare with fear-stricken eyes into nothingness.

Mae pointed out, “See, she’s got on the dress she was going to wear for the wedding. She changed, anyhow. What do you suppose happened?”

Then Nick herded them out into the hall:

"Let me talk to her alone. Let me find out what it's all about."

He shut the door and locked it, and they could hear his voice in a soothing monotone within.

Mae beckoned them to her own room, a little way down the corridor. It was like waiting for the outcome of dangerous surgery—no one thought of anything but waiting.

Save Katheren, possibly. She was thinking of the night in Indianapolis when a voice had called up Ruth, the voice of her husband, Rex Shanley.

No question of a phone call now, or a note, or a visitor. She knew the terror hadn't been so simple, so obvious.

It was maddest nonsense, but—was that what had happened to Ruth alone in her room? Had she seen her dead husband, Rex Shanley?

Leaning at the window, looking out (there was nothing else to do), Katheren could see Alden down below standing by his Chrysler, parked in a no-parking zone. The street lamps went on, and neon signs were beginning to light up all over the city. Someone ought to tell Alden to put his car away and come upstairs. . . .

Agatha, reluctantly admitting she'd better not sit around all day, had wrenched herself by the sheer strength of her will from the pleasure of waiting to find out what had stalled the wedding. Mother, father and daughter Tozer had climbed into the Nash and driven away—still pursuing Milton Smalnick and glory.

And the pale blue of the Beardsleys' room, like Katheren's except for its color, gradually deepened, and the shadows grew darker, and Mae moved restlessly about, turning on the lights.



All of which seemed unreal and remote. In the next room, there was reality. In the next room Nick and Ruth were striving with a ghost, like the jealous ghost in the Spanish legend, an implacable Rex Shanley. Well, it was up to Nick. It depended on his strength, his sympathy and love. And his luck. The struggle was private; nobody could do anything to help.

What outcome did George expect? He showed not even interest. He languished in one of his moods of profound lassitude—or saintly patience.

A door slammed in the corridor, echoing. Woar uncrossed his legs, put away his pipe without apparent haste, but nevertheless beat Mae and Katheren across the room. Ruth's door, it had been. No need asking about the wedding. That was off for good. A look at Nick Leeds told them so, abundantly.

He stood facing the door, legs braced apart and his face contorted with inexpressible anger. He hurled something against the panel, by way of a parting curse.

The thing jingled and fell to the floor. It was Agatha's gift, the silly bracelet, something old, something new . . .

Nick was blind. He never saw the three faces in the Beardsleys' doorway. He lunged for the stairs, flinging his legs out in fierce strides, swinging his arms as if fighting away invisible adversaries.

Mae, in an odd little voice, said, "Can't you stop him, George?"

"I" and Woar looked unutterably surprised. "Stop him? How could anyone stop him now?"

Ruth sat on the bed. Her face was drawn and mask-like. She made helpless gestures and said, "I couldn't help it. He's gone."

"Gone where?"

"Just gone. Gone for good. That's all."

And that *was* all—all she could tell them, at any rate.

Beardsley came rushing up, appalled and out of breath.

"Did you see him? Couldn't you stop him?" Mae asked, impatiently. The questions were silly, the answers self-evident: yes and no respectively.

"What the hell's happening here, anyway?" Beardsley demanded. "The crazy fool almost knocked me down. Can't marry Ruth, through with women forever, quitting his job and taking his mother where they'll never see anybody they ever knew in their lives. What goes on, I'd like to know!"

Mae couldn't tell him any more than Katheren, but she had an irrepressible flair for giving orders:

"Are you going to let those children split up like that—just on account of a silly lovers' quarrel? Get in your car, Alden! Go after him! Bring him back here! What are you standing there for, staring at me?"

"But listen to reason, Mae—he took out in that Mercury like a rabbit! I couldn't catch up—"

"Which road did he take?"

"That way—west."

"He'll be in Albuquerque, like as not. Alden Beardsley, if you don't hurry up, I'll start after him myself."

Alden hurried up, and started on an absolutely empty journey to Albuquerque, sixty-two miles away. He was

gone three hours. He returned empty handed. However:

When he was gone, Mae suddenly remembered, "The minister's still waiting! If somebody doesn't tell him it's off—"

"Do that, by all means," Woar told her briskly. He started slapping Ruth's face and shaking her.

"Find her a doctor while you're about it," he added. "She's about to go off the deep end, I'm afraid."

Mae went downstairs, the doctor came up. He advised a sedative and plenty of rest.

"Mrs. Shanley," he told them, "is suffering from nervous shock. Death in the family or something?"

"Deaths," said George. "Plural. Thanks. Good-by."

When the doctor went away, Ruth lay listless on the bed, her face screwed up for weeping yet dry and tearless. George used the moments before Mae returned again to tell Katheren privately, "She doesn't deserve all this, you understand?"

Katheren nodded. She had, in fact, endured Ruth's heartbreaking eyes about as long as her own emotional arrangements could stand.

"Very well. You can help. See to it that Mae has dinner with us downstairs. When I get up from the table, keep Mae otherwise engaged, will you? I want an hour alone with Ruth—an hour alone, and undisturbed. It's extremely important."

"I'll do the best I can, George."

"Good girl."

"But I'd like to know what it's all about."

He gave her a suddenly quizzical, impish look.

"Asking my professional opinion? You, Katheren? I thought detectives weren't considered nice people."

She said, "Oh, go to blazes!"

## Eighteen

Nevertheless, she did what he asked.

It was a cheerless dinner, Mexican dishes, chicken tacos, tortillas, and such, which Mae regarded sniffily and George ate at top speed.

Mae professed to believe that Nick's quarrel with Ruth had been a simple case of true love not running smoothly. Katheren kept her own ghostly conviction to herself, since it was all womanly instinct and no logic; since, moreover, she didn't quite believe in the ghost of Rex Shanley herself; but the day was to come when she would be proved nearer right than Mae. Nearer right than her husband, too, though he, of course, never let her find that out.

At any rate, George excused himself:

"Must make a long distance call to New York. It may take me hours."

Mae said, "And I must get back to Ruth. I don't feel right about leaving her alone, even if she is sleeping."

Then Katheren interceded with, "You didn't hear what the doctor said?"

"What?"

"People upset her. She ought to have time to get over this by herself."

"I guess he knows his business but—I'm always afraid of what she may do to herself. You know, dear, people

get depressed, they think there isn't anything left to live for, and you've got one of those things on your hands."

"I don't see any reason for worrying."

"Well, I do. If only Alden hadn't given her that gun of his to protect herself! I told him then, I said, Alden, you get the silliest ideas! What can that poor girl do with a gun, of all things! The next time my back's turned, though, he gives it to her. At least, I saw the empty holster in his suitcase. Katheren, do you suppose we'll ever understand what goes on in men's minds?"

"I doubt it," said Katheren, with feeling.

Automatic or no automatic, Mae ordered ice-cream and another cup of coffee.

By that time, George was upstairs, talking to Ruth, and there was nothing Katheren could do but hope he wouldn't drive the woman too far.

2

Mae had arranged Ruth in a chair with pillows and a quilt about her. She regarded Woar doubtfully, suspicious of that disarming smile. The dinner on a tray beside her hadn't been tasted.

He lit his pipe and sat on the edge of the bed. She kept a determined, almost belligerent silence.

"After all," he said quietly, "the worst is over. You confessed the truth to Nick Leeds. He's gone. Or wasn't it the truth? No matter, it must all come out now. You see that, don't you?"

She shrugged. She pressed her lips firmly together.

"Um. Well, I don't seem to be getting anywhere, do I? Too bad. I could be of help to you if I knew your

secret. I might be able to help you avoid the nasty consequences. Care to think that over for a moment?"

She thought, and said, "What consequences? I haven't done anything."

"That isn't quite true. Rex Shanley wouldn't be dead if you hadn't done something. Right?"

Obviously right. She winced and lowered her eyes.

"I'm not going to tell you anything," she said firmly. "I'm not going to talk to you at all. I'm not very clever, Mr. Brendan. I only know enough to keep my mouth shut tight. That's the safest thing I can do. So you see, it isn't any use."

She folded her hands with finality in her lap.

Woar nodded approval and said, "Let me finish my pipe, then. Merely point to the door when you want me to go. I'll understand."

He composed himself on the foot of the bed, smoked lazily and looked at her as if he had a lot to think about.

Quarter of an hour passed.

She lay back in her chair, with her face turned away from the light. Her fingers began to move nervously, tracing a seam in the quilt, and this was what Woar had been waiting for.

He dumped the ashes from his pipe into the cuff of his gray flannel trousers and stood up:

"So you're afraid of me," he said. "You killed Rex Shanley to defraud an insurance company, killed Cicely to keep her mouth shut, and you're afraid I know too much too. What a stale dreary piece of business! I'm sorry for Nick. Men seldom love women as he loves you—and that filthy secret to carry about for the rest of his life is a handsome reward, isn't it?"

"No—you're wrong."

"Do you still want me to believe in a tuppenny mys-

terious doom dogging your heels? Rot! Do you think I'll melt before those heartrending eyes of yours, and keep quiet as Nick is doing? That's likely! No, my dear Ruth, this is the end. We've protected you and cherished you like a lot of addlepates. It's time the Beardsleys and the Tozers knew the truth."

"I suppose you're going to tell them?" and she asked the question in a listless voice while she puttered with pillow and quilt.

"Can't very well do otherwise."

"I'm not going to let you," she said, in the same tone, but with a quick movement of her hands. She had taken Beardsley's automatic from the side of the chair, where it had been pushed down beneath the cushion.

She pointed it at Woar.

"Ah," said Woar. "Firearms."

"I'm not going to let you out of here to tell anybody," she told him in her soft, husky voice. It was no longer unsteady. "I'm not afraid to shoot, either."

"I believe you."

"You shouldn't come into a woman's room. They won't do anything to me if I shoot you. They won't blame me at all."

"Quite so."

He stood very quietly, extremely careful not to make a move that might be misinterpreted.

"Why did you have to stick your nose into this trouble?" she asked plaintively. "You only make it worse. You find out things and get them all wrong, just as I was afraid."

"Always glad to be put right, I assure you."

She was pleading with him to believe her now.

"I didn't know about the insurance. I didn't know what was going to happen when we started out from

New York. I didn't understand. Do you think I would have stood for a murder, two murders? Do you think I'm that crazy? I just didn't know what it all meant till it happened."

"You could have said so then."

"Didn't I try to at Migler's? I wanted so much to warn you people. Didn't I try to tell you, but you had to change your clothes? And Nick, but he was out of his cabin? And even Alden Beardsley? Then it happened, and it was too late to tell anybody. All I did since then, I couldn't help. I asked Nick to go away and forget me, and he wouldn't listen. I had to let him be nice to me. I couldn't open my mouth for fear—"

Fear was the word. It shut her mouth again. She stopped pleading instantly, retreated into her habitual silence, the terrified silence of one who suspects the walls of listening, and the doors and the windows of betraying her.

"Fear of what?"

"No use asking," she said sullenly. "If I tell, I'll get what Cicely got. If I don't get what she got, I'll be just as bad off with a murder rap hanging over me. And even then, there's a better reason. Maybe I still have a chance of fixing this up my own way, so nobody else suffers. There's been enough suffering now."

"You love him, don't you?"

"Love him? Me? Wait a minute, who do you mean?"

"Nick."

"He's the first real, fine, honest man I ever met. I don't know what's the matter with me, I—I shouldn't let myself talk to you."

"Point of honor, is it?"

She looked searchingly, hopefully, into Woar's eyes, as if she would be very glad to see that he understood.



She was, as he had noticed before, a singularly beautiful and appealing woman. However, she continued to aim the automatic directly into his stomach.

"This," he said with an unbalanced smile, "isn't the time to question a woman's ethics. I accept the point of honor. I respect it. I shan't ask you to tell me any more. I believe you love Nick: I believe you'd marry him if you could. I believe you didn't murder Rex Shanley, and if you don't make a horrible mistake with your right index finger, I shall probably be able to prove it. It's not as impossible as you think. Mrs. Shanley, I suggest you trust me and my not too inadequate sense of discretion. What do you say?"

She didn't say, but Woar took the chance.

He stepped forward confidently with his hand outstretched for the automatic.

## 3

During the rest of the night, Hazlitt Woar had time to realize what he had let himself in for.

He had promised a bedeviled young woman that he would find the murderer of Rex Shanley and bring him to justice, without any clear idea how to bring it off. Whether he had promised this under the influence of a pair of especially thrilling eyes or in the excitement of discovering the ultimate twist in what he had lately called a dreary piece of business, he could never quite decide.

Not that it made any difference, one way or the other. All the fancy promises in the world couldn't alter his single-minded purpose to lay hands on his quarry before his quarry landed him in jail. Woar had never

before in his life taken so strong a dislike to any murderer.

In spite of Katheren's pitiably frazzled condition, they set out for Arizona that night. They thought it better not to wait for the usual ceremonious call of the local police wanting the alias George Brendan.

They set out in the Winters' Model "A." It had crept into Santa Fé about seven in the evening, crept because its tires had been bulwarked with patent blow-out patches till they consisted of little else. The Winters and particularly Ray Kemp wanted to get on in pursuit of the Tozers. George, buying the expedition two new tubes and casings, had made what the twins called a "deal."

The weather turned brutally cold. The Ford lacked a top. The party spent hours drawn up at the side of the road, investigating sinister noises in the motor. As far as Katheren was concerned, that leg of the journey beyond Santa Fé was worst of all.

Her husband was in the throes of one of his irritating periodic fits of impatience.

Gradually she got the idea; this was pursuit of some sort. Pursuit of whom, and why, she was much too miserable to inquire.

When they had left La Fonda, George had taken pains to put a flea in Mae's ear, a hint that even the Beardsleys might not be safe from their friend the informer. Mae had seemed impressed—and long before the Model "A" could struggle as far as Algodones, the Chrysler shot by them in the direction of Albuquerque again. Mae, Alden and Ruth were in it.

Katheren was surprised; she didn't know the Beardsleys had reasons of their own for avoiding the police.

She did know, however, that the elderly Ford was

practically out of the chase, if chase was what it was meant to be. Its motor boiled at thirty. It missed and spat at thirty-five. Forty was the best it could do. . . .

Ahead of them, like bright beads, the components of the Shanley case had strung themselves along the thin thread of highway between New Mexico and California.

Distance was the problem, and time, or the lack of time, the essence of it.

Once again the Ford stopped. Boyd Winter climbed out to fuss with the ignition distributor. Besides, they had to wait to let the boiling subside.

With what George had to do it with, it looked very much as if the problem as stated would prove insoluble.

## Nineteen

**A**lbuquerque. They pulled in at dawn. The station was the only place open, so they crouched numbly over hot coffee at the counter of the Harvey House lunch room. All except Woar, who was still being brisk and purposeful. He reconnoitered.

When he came back to the warmth of the station restaurant, he found Ray Kemp sound asleep with his rumpled head on his folded arms. He muttered in his sleep and tried to turn over. The twins devoured wheat cakes. Katheren was in a hypnotic trance over a bowl of hot porridge.

Woar didn't mention the most important fact: that they were four hours behind the last of the cars he was chasing.

Also, they were losing ground fast, at the rate Boyd and Burnet ate wheat cakes. George felt like getting them all back into the car and taking off, regardless; but his wife's wan face made him relent. The waitress threw him a smile that was a miracle of good will for that early hour, and drew him a cup of scalding coffee.

"Good news," he said, and slid a telegram under Katheren's nose:

IMPORTANT YOU AVOID LOS ANGELES. FOREIGN TREATMENT UNNECESSARY. COMPLICATIONS NOT EXPECTED.

HOPE TO INFORM YOU MARY'S COMPLETE RECOVERY  
SAN FRANCISCO TOMORROW. CHEER UP.

GAILLARD

"What's good about it?" Katheren wanted to know.  
"I'm not cheering up till Mary doesn't need the doctor any more."

Woar used a dirty hand to rub his tired, unshaven face, leaving it arranged in a crooked smile:

"I wonder. Will you ever love me again?"

"Probably not. How far is San Francisco?"

"One thousand, one hundred and a few odd miles."

"Any more good news?"

"Oh, the usual. More rain, more rivers rising, no busses coming through from the East, even the California Limited a few hours late. Chicago had snow."

She took a deep breath, and said, "Go away, George. You make me very unhappy. I'm going to eat my oatmeal in peace, if it's the last thing I ever do."

She meant it.

The twins finished breakfast and went out to mope over their car. Ray woke with a start and stumbled out after them.

George finished his coffee and smoked a pipe on the deserted station platform. He was worried. He was afraid of Katheren in her present state of mind. He tried to think of something suitable to say to her, and couldn't.

If only his wife would hold together till the Shanley case could be settled!

2

She didn't.

She came out of the lunch room a desperate woman, leading Caligula faster than he wanted to go. George

thought for a moment she was going to refuse flatly to budge any further.

The Winter twins were at their usual game.

They had raised the Ford's hood and crammed all except buttocks and legs within. The motor popped and spat. Ray grumpily gave a kick at the projecting quarters:

"Put your toys back in the box, we're taking off."

The twins showed long faces and wiped off the grease with what had been a towel.

"That's a likely story," mused Burnet.

"Warped second gear coming over the hills last night," said Boyd.

"Not only that," Burnet added, "but when I said I thought she needed oil, she really needed oil. We just had to put in four quarts. The con rods are loose as ashes. The mains too. I don't like to mention valves at all."

"She's taking an awful beating," concluded Boyd. "She's not going to last, that's all."

Like mourners burying a dear friend, they fastened down the hood.

Woar looked at his watch. He sighed.

"Will you sell her?"

"The car?"

"Yes."

"And what happens to us? We can't just get out and walk the rest of the way."

"I'll transport you, valves and con rods permitting."

"Sure, that's fair enough," said Ray.

Burnet looked at Boyd, who asked in a tentative voice, "Could you stand fifty bucks?"

"Right," said Woar quickly. He impressed twenty-five from Katheren, took twenty-five from his own

pocket, and slipped behind the wheel. He meshed gears.

"Let's go."

The boys scrambled in on top of the luggage. The Ford shuddered and lurched. From there on, its accelerator went down to the floor. The results surprised everyone. They even passed a few cars.

"I have seven dollars, thirty cents and two bent air-mail stamps," Katheren notified her husband above the roar of wind and mechanism. "Can you do better?"

"Four dollars and some silver."

"Will eleven dollars and this car take us to San Francisco? Don't bother to answer. I know."

In the face of the impossible, their new car showed its spirit, seemed to say it would take them to Vancouver if it had to.

They bounded over a thunderous cattle-guard, then settled to a reasonably constant speed of fifty-seven.

### 3

They made Gallup in three hours.

The Ford made it no further. Hollow clanking came from her guts. The con rod bearings had burned out.

It was nine o'clock. As they turned into the most likely looking garage, the Beardsley Chrysler pulled out. Its serene bulk had the look of a passing ocean liner to castaways on a raft. Woar shouted, "Hoy," and squawked the horn. Katheren shouted something else and waved her arm. Ray and the Winter twins put their fingers in their mouths and whistled. The row was enough to make most of Gallup turn and stare with some amazement, but not enough to stop the Chrysler on its westward way.

Katheren still believes she caught Alden's eye cocked

at them in the rear-view mirror. She distinctly made out Mae in lively conversation with Ruth in the tonneau. Then they were gone. Maddening.

"Oh, well," murmured Woar philosophically, and climbed out to look up a mechanic.

"All out," said Ray. "End of the line, no fooling about it."

The mechanic was not the cheery, eager, charming kind, but the opposite. His face fell at the sight of the car. He gave ear to the clanking from the crank-case with almost morbid reluctance. He rubbed a melancholy chin and brooded for a few minutes on the horror of it all.

"You ain't lookin' to me to fix this heap, are you?"

"Can't you?"

"Sure, I suppose I can fix anything, if I got to. I suppose you're in a hurry, too, and you want me to do a cheap job?"

"Right."

"Well, she'll take a new shaft, bearings, rods, pistons and valves. Say thirty-five bucks, if not more when I get into her."

Boyd said, "We'll be running along now."

Burnet added, "Maybe we'll see you again, maybe we won't."

Ray apologized, "If we don't get a lift early, we'll never get one. So long."

Then they were gone, they and their suitcases and golf bags.

Katheren found the world to be suddenly very quiet, motionless and empty. She wasn't traveling. She wouldn't be for a long time to come, considering the Ford's condition. And for the first time in days, she was practically alone with her husband.



Relations between them had been strained further than she thought. She was distinctly averse to making conversation with him, so she walked Caligula and looked for a drugstore and something to relieve her whacking headache.

It was only a little after nine in the morning. If the Beardsleys had put up for the night in Gallup, why not the others?

Two blocks from the garage, Katheren wasn't surprised to see the Tozers and their Nash. Ray Kemp and the Winter twins were just settling themselves in it. They had wangled themselves a lift. Henry came out of a small café tucking money into his bill-fold. Having paid the family breakfast bill, he was taking the wheel, setting out for California. Everybody waved behind the dusty windows to Katheren, left behind.

She waved back. The complacent, over-crowded sedan waddling westward somehow annoyed her. She was in a mood to be annoyed by anything.

And wasn't she glad to be left behind? She wasn't chasing anybody—her husband was doing that. In fact, he had miraculously caught up with his precious Shanley case, but only by dint of running the daylights out of their sole means of transportation, so that he was promptly losing it again. Now he would have to give it up for good. And it served him right.

She drank a glass of fizzy stuff at a drugstore soda fountain. It had been glibly guaranteed to wipe out the worst headache in man or beast in less than three minutes.

It did nothing of the sort.

She led Caligula back to the garage, hoping to sit in the Ford and rest. However, the car's front end had

been hoisted up on a derrick and a repairman lay underneath, methodically taking the motor to pieces.

George wasn't anywhere about.

The repairman said he hadn't seen him since the car was sold.

"*This* car? Sold?"

"Boss gave him fifteen dollars for it. Don't ask me why."

"I won't," Katheren assured him.

She found a wooden bench to sit on, along with her vague dismay.

What was the man up to now?

It was clear in Katheren's mind that she was about to have a tremendous row with him—if he hadn't abandoned her for good.

By the time George appeared from round the corner, she was ready for him. She was also aware of what he was up to. He had Milton Smalnick in tow, and Milton left him to cross the highway to another garage—where as sure as fate the Lagonda was parked. George had hunted up Smalnick, induced him to give them a lift.

"Off in a cloud of dust, I suppose," she said as he sat beside her. "The chase is still on. View halloo."

"Well, yes," he admitted. He tried to take her hand. She wouldn't let him. She refused to be conciliated, tricked or blandished any more.

"Heading straight for Los Angeles, aren't you?"

"Why, yes, that does seem the general direction—"

"After what Gaillard warned you, you're going to Los Angeles. You're going to follow this murder case to the end. The devil with your honeymoon, you're a detective first, last and always. I see."

"Dearest Katheren!" he implored her.

"Dearest Katheren my eye!"

"You might listen, you know. I'm trying to tell you I can't help myself. I must go on. There'll be more blood spilled if I don't. You understand that much, I hope? In any case"—and he seized her hand in spite of her struggles, held it tightly till it hurt—"nothing is going to stop me. Not even *you*, my beloved wife! However, I thought it over at length last night, and decided to give up investigation. Give it up forever. Have a go at selling insurance, perhaps. Anything you like. I give you my most solemn promise, to take effect immediately this case is washed up."

"I always liked the pretty tinkle of your promises when they broke."

"Oh, Katheren! Don't you see?"

"No. You're going on?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Good-by. I'm not."

"I rather expected that. As a matter of fact, you're better off waiting here, out of it. A day's rest, and you'll be your old self again. Good girl! Expect me in forty-eight hours, possibly less. Take care of yourself!"

He kissed the hand, thrust a wad of crumpled bills and silver into it, and ran.

The Lagonda had been backed into the street. George slipped behind the wheel, took off superbly, swooped round a heavy truck and vanished.

Caligula tugged on his lead. He couldn't make Katheren understand, so he sat down mournfully to think about his master, and resignedly wait.

And that was that, exactly as Katheren had dreaded it would happen some day.

Gone.

Whether or not she would have waited for him is debatable. Probably not.

She felt indescribably hurt, indescribably angry, in about equal parts. She was also afraid something horrible might happen to her husband, which suggests she was finding out she loved him in spite of all.

At any rate, she went back inside the garage for the battered tube of tooth-paste she had brought along from La Junta. She found it squashed down alongside the seat. She also found a long, oily fragment of black cloth laid out on a newspaper for her to see:

"Want to know why your bearings burned out?" the mechanic asked. "Take a look at that."

"What is it?"

"Necktie. Regular five-and-ten-cent store, your crankcase was. No wonder the oil feed line got clogged."

"What else did you find?"

"Bits and pieces. This here looks like a hunk of a cheap ring."

*The necktie, the ring.*

"Did you tell my husband about these?"

"Didn't tell nobody but you. Just came on 'em."

He may have thought Katheren a little odd, the way she carefully wrapped the oily stuff in the newspaper.

Why had they been put in the crankcase? To dispose of them. Even so, what a strange method of disposal. . . . And Katheren, without half trying, made a series of dazzling deductions.

Between the Winter twins and Ray Kemp on the one hand, and the Tozer family on the other, some kind of guilty secret was shared. Guilt connected with the murders of Rex Shanley and Cicely. Well, then:

Wasn't it probable that the damning evidence had been put in the crankcase by Ray or the twins, first to hide the stuff, second to sabotage the motor and bring about precisely what had happened—the stranding of the Woars in a Gallup garage?

Suspicious was the fact that the Winters particularly had done all they could along the way to slow up the Woars. Suspicious was their tinkering with the motor last night and this morning. Suspicious also, the convenience with which the Tozers had been waiting for the boys to take them on.

The murderer had been doing his utmost to stop the Woars. The Woars had been stopped by the Winters and Ray Kemp. Didn't it follow that the Winters and Ray Kemp were the murderers?

Unless it could be that Tozer was guilty, and the boys merely helping him get away.

Anyhow, Katheren felt very sure she had the solution of the Shanley case wrapped up in a thickness of newspaper.

## 5

"Let's see how long it takes you," she told the used car salesman, "to sell me the fastest car in Gallup."

He made her get in and sit behind the wheel of a blue Packard coupé, last year's model. He lifted the hood and the cover of the luggage compartment for her, as if there were jewels inside.

"Very well," said Katheren. "I have to make you out a check on a New York bank for it. Can you cope with that?"

"Call New York by long distance to get an O.K. That'll cost you a few dollars extra."

At four minutes to eleven that morning, Katheren

drove out of Gallup, the owner of a very pretty and responsive car. If nothing like as fast as the Lagonda, it could be pushed along till the Lagonda stopped somewhere, and overtake it then.

Headache had been forgotten, weariness put off with hot coffee, and a new purpose in life acquired. Wouldn't George be surprised to see her!

At twenty past, she was crossing the line into the State of Arizona.

She persuaded the speedometer needle up to seventy. Caligula made himself comfortable on the shelf behind the seat.

Katheren took comfort of another kind, having figured mileages and geography. Needles was the city on the California-Arizona border. She ought to reach there before dark. If not at Needles, she expected to overtake George somewhere on the road in Arizona. With her new evidence from the Ford crankcase, he ought to be able to complete his case without risking the rest of the journey to Los Angeles.

Then by following Route Fifty from Barstow, they could drive through Bakersfield and Fresno to San Francisco.

It had stopped occurring to her by now that, some two hours ago, she had parted from her husband forever. She even blamed herself for being a bad sport. She was quite willing to be convinced that he had only left her behind in Gallup because he expected violence before he brought his murderer to account. He hadn't wanted her damaged in the fracas. Really, an awfully nice man once you understood him. . . .

She breezed through Holbrook.

Slightly surprising to Katheren, but increasingly evi-

dent; there was nothing at all the matter with the used Packard she had bought.

Nothing, that is, except a tendency on the part of one rear tire to run soft. After two stops for air and the discovery of a tenpenny nail in the shoe, she decided to take no more chances with it. She took time out in Winslow to change to the spare. She also took on gas, oil and a hamburger.

On a paper napkin she computed her average speed for the morning; it came out at a little better than fifty miles an hour. She went over the figures for mistakes. It still came out a little better than fifty. She must have looked disappointed.

"Don't forget," said the hamburger provider, studying her figures in a kindly, interested way, "you slowed up for towns."

"Statistics are always discouraging to me. Did you see a Lagonda pass here this morning?"

"A what?"

When enlightened, the man reluctantly admitted he had not.

"It may have been going too fast for you to notice. It's trying to catch up with a Mercury with a man in it alone. Did you see that, by any chance?"

"No, don't seem like I did."

"Or a new Chrysler with two women and a man in it?"

"I'm not up on the new cars, lady. I got an old Jordan, and when it comes to getting around—"

"I know how you feel. How about an overcrowded Nash?"

"Couple bales o' hay on the front bumper?"

"It isn't very likely, I'm afraid. Thanks just the same."

She paid for the hamburger and coke: fifteen cents.

She paid for the gas, ten gallons of it. According to the salesman in Gallup, the Packard would give her twenty miles to the gallon. As she had sensibly foreseen, twelve was more like it. Twelve into the nine hundred eighty miles from Gallup to San Francisco. . . . Anyhow, to get to the end of their journey would cost about three more dollars than she possessed.

Which was one of those jarring little facts that insisted upon being faced.

Why hadn't she made her check large enough to give herself a few extra hundreds in cash? The used-car salesman in Gallup wouldn't have minded in the least.

Another jarring little fact was the uniform lack of information about George along the way. The day grew hot and long, the desert hotter and dustier, and the chase more and more futile.

Flagstaff, Ash Fork, Kingman; she stopped at each to ask questions, but the Lagonda hadn't been seen. Ash Fork remembered the Tozer Nash. It had stopped for gas. Kingman was doubtful about the Nash, definite about the Beardsley Chrysler, and tentative in identifying a Mercury that could have been Nick's. All of them were well ahead of Katheren. All of them had had opportunity to connect with one another along the way.

However, Katheren was interested mainly in the Lagonda.

It never occurred to her that George might have changed to one of the other cars. She had no way of knowing that he had arranged a meeting of the travelers. She knew nothing about Palmyra Hot Springs, that isolated rendezvous in the desert, or of his plans to end the Shanley affair in privacy.

She doggedly pushed on.



Flagstaff, Ash Fork, Kingman; towns in many respects promising, but not promising to Katheren that her husband was on the road ahead. The Lagonda simply hadn't been seen.

And the sun began to set, and burn straight into her eyes over the top of a ridge of desolate, fantastic mountains. The heat, rushing through the open windows, broiled her as if she were so much unfeeling bacon in the hands of a conscientious cook. The barren land, the empty road, the loneliness, grew savage.

She crossed the Colorado River into California.

The Needle Rocks cast long, jagged eastward shadows, not comforting to her. The prospect of darkness, the threat of night in this enormous emptiness, roused a small feeling of panic. What if she ran out of gas, found herself stranded?

The smoke of a train; a water tank and a cluster of cottonwoods appeared over the stony horizon; the town of Needles. A small town, and excruciatingly hot, it nevertheless ran to super-service station complete with the grinning young man in a spotless white uniform. He cleaned grime and insects from her windshield even as he inquired, "What'll it be this evening?"

"Did a foreign car, a Lagonda, go through here recently?" and Katheren prepared herself for the blank look and the slow shake of the head.

"Uh-huh. Stopped for gas. Going west."

"Two men in it?"

"One. Little after five o'clock, it was."

"*One* man? *Five* o'clock? Almost two hours ago—"

"Beg your pardon, one hour ago. Less than that, I'd say. Lady, you forgot to turn your watch back to Pacific Standard Time at Seligman."

"In other words, it's only ten minutes of six?"

"Righty. Folks do make that mistake. Anything else I can do for you?"

He couldn't describe the solitary man in the Lagonda; he might have been Woar or Smalnick. Rather than puzzle over it, she told him to put in gas and oil.

One hundred fifty miles of hard driving to Barstow. Unearthly heat and a hard climb. But, the boy said, an excellent highway.

"Kind of lonely, if you don't mind that. I guess you can take care of yourself, though."

She was warned. However, she thought only of catching up with the Lagonda before it reached Barstow.

All but two dollars and thirty-five cents went into the Packard's bowels there in Needles. Two dollars and thirty-five cents against the seven hundred miles up to San Francisco. She *had* to catch up with it now.

She sped on. Needles dwindled and disappeared in the rear view mirror of the Packard. She began the climb over the mountains. The motor began to boil.

She was in the desert again, a desert that had opened out to horizons so vast, cruel and awesome that she saw herself as a minute particle of life crawling painfully up some infernal sloping platter, towards a rim that constantly retreated. She saw no house, no car, no living thing anywhere. As evidence of other life on the planet, there was only the road, always straight, steep and endless. It was not quite enough.

Then the savage landscape turned purple. It would soon be dark. And suddenly it was dark, as suddenly as if an unseen hand had switched out the light.

At the same time, the infernal platter tilted the other way, and the road descended swiftly into a black, gigantic, bottomless valley.

## Twenty

Palmyra Hot Springs lies half a mile from the paved highway, at the end of a neglected and almost invisible side road. Originally it had been a half-hearted attempt at a desert health resort, of the sort frequently found in southern California. Why anyone made the attempt there, at the bottom of a hellish sink in the Mojave Desert, has yet to be explained.

A bleached phantom of a sign points travelers to the place. CABINS, the sign offers; RADIO-ACTIVE MINERAL BATHS, SULPHUR SPRING WATER, MEALS. Under the faded and peeling paint, a dozen changes of management might be traced, if anyone wished to bother.

Katheren probably noticed neither the sign nor the side road. The Hot Springs showed no lights.

She pulled up under the paintless porch of a ramshackle filling station, marked PALMYRA. The heat, when she stopped, wrapped her round like a woolly blanket.

A horde of winged and crawling things came at her. Somewhere in the unnatural stillness, radio music jiggled and crackled feverishly with desert static.

She blew her horn, and a boy showed himself. He was brown and naked, save for sneakers and a pair of faded swimming trunks. He gazed at her from the door of the filling station shack with impenetrable stupidity.

Caligula woke out of a doze, and made uneasy sounds. Before she could quiet him, and make known to the naked boy that she wanted water in her radiator, a stocky figure pushed past the boy and came to the side of the car. He was Milton Smalnick.

Before he could recognize Katheren's face in the shadow, he had asked her, "Got room for me going west?"

Whether he was more surprised, or Katheren, would be impossible to say. He gaped.

"Where's your car?" she asked.

"In back," and he waved out into the solid darkness.

"Where's George?"

"Why, he caught up with Beardsley in Arizona. He went on. He must be way ahead."

"Good Lord!"

"I'm stranded here in this bake-oven. I got some water in my gas tank. Car won't run on water. If you hadn't come along, I'd probably have to walk two hundred miles into Hollywood to get somebody to come out and tow it home. Damn it, these bugs are driving me *screwy*—!"

He opened the door and slid in beside her, waving at the bugs. His face oozed heartfelt gratitude and sweat.

Katheren got water, started the motor and drove out on the highway again. Caligula continued to show uneasiness.

George was somewhere ahead, far ahead!

"He didn't say anything about stopping? My husband, I mean?"

"Not a word."

"The Tozers, and Nick, and the Beardsleys—they're all still ahead?"

"Must be."

"I thought I must be up with the Tozers. Their car has such a load, and I've been hurrying. It's odd. How far ahead, would you say?"

"Search me."

She did, out of the corner of her eye. A feeling of wrongness, of dismay, came over her. Smalnick was leaning forward slightly, in a strained position and with a peculiarly intent look on his face. He was craning his neck to stare up at the rear view mirror.

"What on earth are you watching back there?"

He started, but he laughed elaborately and relaxed against the cushion:

"Me? I ain't watching anything."

"I don't believe you."

"So you don't believe me. What of it?"

She was amazed by the hardness and contempt in his voice. She heard him say, "Pretty fast car, this one, ain't it? Plenty of gas in it?"

Katheren knew then he was running away. She felt the cool desperation in the man. It took only an instant to realize he wasn't afraid of her, wasn't bothering to conceal anything from her.

Katheren saw much in that instant. She saw his smile, savage and reckless. She saw his thick, muscular neck. A conviction about the fatal silk necktie suddenly and illogically descended on her. She knew.

She also knew what was in his mind. A lone woman. How easy to overcome! How easy to silence! He would escape in the Packard to Mexico. And Katheren Woar? A shallow grave in the desert, holding her unidentifiable remains. It was a dreadfully familiar idea, horribly convenient, the echo of dozens of crimes she had read about in the newspapers.

The look of his face in the faint light of the dash made it all very clear.

Katheren, sick with fear and trembling from anger, put a foot firmly on the brakes.

"Want to pull up?"

He asked the question in a careless voice, to taunt her. She was quite unable to answer.

"Sure, I'll drive," he added cynically. "You can rest. It's a good idea."

Her knees shook. Her wrists behaved like limp string. Nevertheless, she brought the car to a crawl and turned it to the edge of the macadam shoulder. It was a wide road. She could just about make it. . . .

He was getting ready to open the door.

She swung the wheel furiously. She jammed her foot down hard on the throttle. Like a frightened colt, the Packard squealed round in a half circle, straightened and lurched up the gentle grade in the direction it had come. The motor picked up speed, biting into those few miles that separated Katheren from Palmyra.

Her husband would be there. Caligula's restlessness should have told her that before. Now, if only she could keep going!

But Lefty slammed the door shut and grabbed for the wheel. His foot kicked at Katheren's ankle. She lost the throttle, found it again, thrust all her weight against it. The car balked, surged on, dancing wildly up the road.

For a very brief moment, she thought she might get away with it, might bring the car within shouting distance of the tiny star of yellow light in the black desert. Then Lefty's arm curved round her neck. Its strength appalled her. At the same time, the motor went entirely mad. Lefty had forced the gears into neutral.

Through the desperate blur and confusion, a small voice kept telling Katheren, "This is how it feels. This is the end of you, my dear!"

The arm doubled like a nutcracker about her throat. The car was losing headway, tilting and slewing in the soft stuff at the edge of the road; Caligula's tense body struggled behind her head, and his claws caught in her hair; but these matters were relatively unimportant. She fought blindly and hopelessly for life and air. . . .

She could never clearly explain what happened, even to herself. Lefty's muscles seemed to soften and relax, enough to let her fill her lungs at least. At the same time he cried out in a thin, high voice of terror. Somehow she was free of him, and tumbling down into the desert sand. She scrambled to her feet and ran with all the strength she had.

She ran with the sand sucking heavily at her feet and brittle branches whipping her legs and tugging her skirt. She ran with the thudding sound of pursuit a little way behind her.

Her wind was giving out. Then she lost a shoe and sprawled headlong beside a prickly bush, which was better than nothing in the extremity. She might not be seen in the darkness if she lay very still behind those sparse branches. She made herself flat against the hot earth, and forced her lungs to give no sound.

It might have been three minutes or three times as long that she lay there. Caligula soundlessly discovered her and crouched against her side. She placed a hand over his wet muzzle to silence his panting. He tried to be quiet about it.

She wasn't being discovered, apparently. What was Smalnick doing?

Eventually she dared to raise herself on her hands and look about.

Faint starlight bathed the horizon and the shapeless floor of the valley. Very far away, the lamp at Palmyra glimmered. Nearer, the Packard loomed on the shallow ridge which the highway followed. It was silent, motionless.

And Smalnick? His silhouette stumbled through the glare of the headlamps. He seemed to be charging aimlessly about, oddly hunched over, searching the ground—looking for her tracks, possibly?

Whatever his intention, he soon went back to the side of the car and sat on the running board. He rested his head in his hands, or seemed to. He turned his face straight towards Katheren, and waited.

She thought he must be waiting for her to move and betray herself.

She cautiously lowered her head, hoping he couldn't hear the heavy beating of her heart. She waited.

Far away, but not far enough, there rose the ghostly yammer of a pack of coyotes. Caligula trembled. Katheren suffered an eery prickling along her spine. The desert grew still again. It, too, waited.

## 2

Caligula had been right.

Behind the Palmyra filling station stood Palmyra Hot Springs, a huddle of mud cabins surrounded by a high wood wall intended to shelter guests from the hot winds. When no wind blew, the wall was stifling. Tonight it was stifling.

Drawn up about a clump of bamboo before the place were the cars: the Lagonda, the Mercury, the Nash and



the Chrysler, indications of more guests than Palmyra Hot Springs had enjoyed in years. Enjoyed? Not exactly that; the management, a woman who was evidently the mother of the naked boy in the filling station resented them, and let it be known. Altogether a strange place to take shelter for the night.

Katheren had been nearer to it than she knew, for the neglected road curved in a quarter circle, and the Springs were within calling distance of the place where she had picked up Lefty Shanker, alias Rex Shanley, alias Milton J. Smalnick of Hollywood and Beverly Hills.

Nick Leeds sat on a box before the gate in the wooden wall, staring moodily at the light in the filling station.

He sucked occasionally on a bottle of warmish beer. Woar picked his way round the shallow, eggy-colored puddle which may or may not have been a hot spring and joined him. He spotted a second bottle of beer, availed himself of it and squatted in the sand at Nick's elbow.

Then Tozer appeared, and Beardsley, and Ray Kemp with one of the Winter twins.

"All's quiet," said Beardsley. "Not a sound out of Smalnick, for once."

Boyd Winter said, "Burnet's keeping an eye on his cabin, though, just in case."

Then Nick scuffled a foot in the sand:

"Listen, what good does this do anybody, getting together here? We can't do anything. This guy's no cop," and he nodded his head at Woar.

He was still under the effects of a slightly broken heart. He still refused to have anything to do with Ruth.

Tozer and Beardsley looked at Woar, putting the job up to him.

"Nick, you're an ass," said Woar quietly, as he dropped his empty beer bottle in the sand. "Shattering, I grant you, to find out that your fiancée has a husband living. But you can't stay shattered forever. Ruth deserves better than that from you."

Nick grunted.

"Grunt away," continued Woar. "You're going to hear it, whether you like it or not. Fifteen apparent strangers came together in eastern Ohio, and one of them was murdered. Fourteen apparent strangers, on their way to different destinations, stayed very much together for a journey of almost three thousand miles. If you don't know by now that your cherished Ruth kept us together, you're being extremely dense.

"The Beardsleys took Ruth under their wing. They'd take in anybody with forty thousand dollars, I dare say. Well, let's add they have kind hearts. And a romantic young truck inspector followed Ruth. Love at first sight. The Tozers pursued Smalnick, because he represented a golden opportunity for a career for Connie. Ray Kemp pursued Connie. Very well, there are two west-bound parties of tourists, one led by the Beardsleys with Ruth, another led by Smalnick, each held together by credible human weaknesses. But what kept Smalnick's party so close to Ruth's? That's the essential mystery.

"What made my presence so undesirable? Who knew I was wanted by the police? That's secondary, of course, yet not uninteresting to me.

"Why was Shanley murdered?

"Why was Cicely murdered?

"Why was Ruth Shanley in deadly fear?

"Perhaps you remember what she told us that day

after her husband was murdered; his going to pieces, drinking, taking up with another woman, and at last promising to start over again in California. I was impressed with her loyalty to a rather loathsome husband, her blind, unquestioning faith in a man whom she couldn't love, who had asked her to give up her own career of singing, who used her unmercifully for his own purposes. That was the man she refused to give away to any of us. That was the man she tried to shield, even when she was desperately afraid of him. That, in case you don't know it, Nick, is constancy.

"In the course of feeling sorry for yourself, you might consider that you forced yourself on Ruth most of the way across America. You forced her quite against her will to promise to marry you. The irresistible pursuer, the lover who won't take 'no' for an answer, the thoroughly self-centered and stone-blind male, drowning his sorrows in lukewarm beer and soothing a bruised ego, because he fancies his sweetheart made a fool of him. A consequence you bloody well deserve. But which she doesn't."

Nick suddenly stood up, hurled his empty bottle into the night. It shattered somewhere, the bits tinkled. The sound touched off a distant, ghostly yelping of coyotes in the wilderness.

"Listen to me, Nick," and Woar kept his voice low, because he knew Nick was ready to listen now. "She had a bad husband. He wanted to use her in an insurance fraud. He took advantage of her loyalty. She wasn't told what he had in mind when they set off to the coast in a second-hand car. He must have a very plausible tongue. He persuaded her to accept a passenger somewhere about Uniontown—a drunk derelict, a tramp who wouldn't be missed. The tramp was established as Rex

Shanley, and murdered. After two bungling attempts. Those attempts gave Ruth her first inkling of her husband's scheme. What she did after that is exactly what any woman would do, constantly threatened, constantly torn between what her husband would do to her and what the police would do to her if she spoke. And you, with your impassioned suit, your refusal to take no for an answer. Can't you see she had to promise to marry you, or confess to the whole rotten mess?"

Nick's knee-cap cracked. In a queer, tight voice he demanded, "Why couldn't she tell me? Why couldn't she trust me?"

"If she had tried to tell you, she would have gone the way of Cicely."

"She was in on this too?"

"She was the blonde siren Ruth's husband had promised to give up. Let's put it all together as well as we can. The idea probably grew out of Rex Shanley's admiration and envy for a boyhood friend, Milton Smalnick, who had pushed his way to considerable success. Let's say he wrote Smalnick one day, asked for an opportunity. Smalnick replied from Hollywood in a helpful vein, even told Rex he could drive an imported car out to California for him and so earn his traveling expenses.

"Rex wanted more. He wanted to get rich quick. He wanted to arrive in California with a fortune in his pocket. He devised what many men have devised before him—an insurance fraud.

"He wanted to start life over again, but with the blonde Cicely, not the faithful Ruth. And he wanted to leave the old Rex Shanley, a debt-ridden failure, far behind in the past.

"He could handle Ruth. He insured his life, told her

a tale, started west. In Uniontown, Pennsylvania, he let her know a bit of what she was in for. Cicely showed up in Uniontown with the Lagonda. They threatened her into taking a tramp—you identified him yourself, Nick—to drive the Pontiac. They followed close after her. She knew now she had to do what she was told or be killed.

“She didn’t know her husband’s scheme yet. When attempts were made to kill the drunken tramp, she began to understand. She tried to warn us. We weren’t available. Then he was murdered, and she was in it as deeply as her husband. He or Cicely kept at her side, prompting her, warning her, bludgeoning her into doing what was necessary. You see, the usual insurance fraud is worked this way: one insures another person, and murders him. But to murder one’s own self, counting on an obviously innocent other person to collect the reward—that’s the new twist Lefty devised.

“Ruth saw her only means of putting them off, though. They wouldn’t harm her till she collected the insurance. If she neither collected it nor refused it finally, she was worth forty thousand dollars to them alive. Even when Lefty used physical punishment to force her to sign the claim in Kansas City, she stood fast. He dared not go too far.

“He played his game well. Cicely was the one who began to crack. Impersonating Mrs. Smalnick, originally intended for one night’s disguise, became difficult to keep up for days. The strain began to tell. She was all for disposing of Ruth, calling the whole scheme off and running for safety. Lefty wouldn’t have it.

“He knew who I was. Cicely had spotted me at Migler’s, torn down a handbill with my picture on it, and used the knowledge whenever she could. Lefty put sugar

in my gas tank, even wrecked my car and burned it up eventually.

"However, when Cicely smashed completely, tried to kill Ruth and escape with what she could take from the hotel safe in Elm Point, Lefty grew desperate. He murdered her practically under my eyes. I was beginning to suspect him then, and his very convincing appearance of rescuing Cicely had the ironic effect of putting me off.

"I was still searching for a reason for Cicely's lying in wait for you, Nick, in St. Louis. I connected the two of you, rather to your disadvantage. Only after I talked with you in La Junta did I realize she had been set to lure you away from Ruth's side. Oh, you'd have resisted her charms, probably. I hope so.

"In any case, I wasn't sure of much till Ruth balked at the wedding. I knew then she had seen her husband. He had been in Santa Fé, probably in the street under her window, making signs to her.

"I pieced the relationship through the seven-fold necktie, which inadvisably Lefty had been trying to plant on any of us he could. His ideas about disposing of evidence are as crude as his efforts at murder, I'm afraid. At any rate, when Lefty picked up the necktie used to strangle the tramp, and for a moment accepted it as his own, one that Ruth had bought him, he betrayed himself. The death's head ring he had taken from the finger of the tramp when changing that poor wretch's identifying properties was intended to surprise him. It didn't, I'm afraid. It surprised Henry Tozer more than anybody. However, the pretended Milton Smalnick is the murderer of Cicely and a nameless tramp—and the question is, which of us is going to turn

him over to the police and see to his trial and conviction?"

"You?"

"Sorry. Not I. Though I'm sure I can't be deported from my bride; I'll be exonerated in San Francisco, I gather; I happen to be giving up criminal detection this evening. Sorry."

Beardsley excused himself, and Henry stared pointedly down at Nick.

After a flicker of hesitation, Nick growled, "So it's me? All right. I'll turn him over for you—after I get through with him."

Woar started back into the court. It was he who found Burnet lying on his face in the sand, with a large bump oozing blood at the back of his head.

"Did you catch him?" Burnet asked when he first opened his eyes.

"No."

"Then he's wise. He busted loose."

Out on the desert, the coyotes set up a weird chorus of baying.

3

Katheren heard them bay, and knew they were close.

She stealthily lifted her head. Smalnick still sat crouched on the running-board of the car. He still seemed to be staring at her.

Caligula growled and trembled. He struggled to free himself. Three pairs of moonlit eyes glinted coldly at Katheren from the nearest clump of sage. They had three pale, motionless bodies, like large dogs or small wolves. Her breath caught in her throat. Without a sound, the three beasts vanished.

Instantly there were a dozen of them, giving voice

as they ran past her and away. Caligula fought furiously against her hand. It took all her strength to hold him.

When he resigned himself and whimpered uneasily, she was able to look again towards the glare of light from the headlamps.

First one or two, then the whole pack flitted warily through the light. Smalnick never moved. He seemed horribly silent, incredibly unaware. . . .

Somewhere Katheren had once heard that coyotes were cowards, that they never attacked a human. They stalked Smalnick. The gray bodies leaped at him. He never moved, till he fell under the attack. From that strange, small, distant nightmare of movement came no sound but a snarl.

Katheren had seen all she could bear.

She was on her feet, running. She remembers the light of the Palmyra filling station bobbing towards her, and a remote voice crying for help. Her own voice, she supposes.

How far she ran, she doesn't know. Quite suddenly she was among men who were staring at her, holding a lantern before her face. Then her husband's arms seized her and held her. She gladly surrendered all further responsibility for her future.

#### 4

When the world came back into focus, she found herself in a barren, stuffy room clutching a glass full of fiery liquor. She was sitting on an iron bed. Her hair, she gathered, was a mess.

George made her drink a little more.

Staring at her from an open doorway, the naked boy and the drab woman who was obviously his mother,



gaped at them. Woar ignored them. He kissed Katheren's liquory lips, and held her with a trembling arm, and confessed, "I'm—I'm frightfully glad you—you're here. Frightfully glad. Oh, frightfully glad."

"It's nice," she said, "to know."

He stopped trembling and kissing her then, and smiled wryly, and said, "Quite so."

Alden Beardsley stepped briskly out of the darkness, carrying a suitcase which he gave to the boy.

"That goes in my car—the Chrysler. Feel up to a long ride, Katheren? That's the girl. I wouldn't drink any more of that stuff if you don't like it."

"What is it?"

"Strange you should ask. It's a mystery. Our hostess here calls it desert brandy. She ought to know. She makes it. Eh, sister?"

The drab woman hid her hands in the folds of her faded gingham dress and looked sullen. Something about her reminded Katheren of the coyotes.

"We can trust her all right," Alden resumed, apparently having read Katheren's mind. "She won't say anything if we don't say anything. Crime doesn't pay, sister. It's bootleg," he added for Katheren's benefit, since she was sniffing the glass. "Distilled from fermented honey, I think. What they don't think of, these desert people!"

"Where's Smalnick? He—"

"Lefty is dead. Seems to have been attacked by a pack of coyotes. Rare occurrence, isn't it, sister? Well, that's what happened, anyhow. As far as we know, the Lagonda ran out of gas down the road a ways, and Lefty was walking back when—" he shrugged, spread his hands in deprecation, and winked heavily.

"We'll be getting along," said Henry Tozer. He was brisk as a bird, and as serious, sticking his head round

the corner of the door. "Taking Constance to Stanford, Ray Kemp thinks she can get in this year. College education never hurt a girl. See you again, Mrs. Brendan? See you again, Beardsley?"

"Oh. Yes, sure you will . . ." and there was quick hand-shaking, permeated by Alden's patent, pious hope that he'd see none of these people again, ever.

"Hen-reee?" cried the voice of Agatha Tozer out of the distance and darkness.

"Get everybody in the car," retorted Henry shortly. "You sit in the back. Connie and Ray sit up front with me."

He, too, winked at Katheren, adding the ghost of a grin. Then he hurried off. He seemed to be stuffing a wad of money into his worn, flabby bill-fold as he strode away, and straightening his shoulders bravely. The trailer money, of course! Smalnick, or Lefty or whoever he was, must have had that in his pocket.

Somebody started a motor. Katheren and Beardsley skirted the sulphurous puddle in time to see Mae kissing good-by to Ruth, who leaned out of Nick's car.

"All the happiness in the world, dear!"

Nick murmured something. Mae drew back, blowing kisses. The wheels of the Mercury kicked impatiently at the sand, the car turned its tail on them and sped towards the highway. It swung eastward.

Mae sighed: "I'd love to be going with them. Arizona, you know. I did so want to be at the wedding. But Alden has to go into Mexico to look over some of his mining interests, you know how it is, don't you, dear?"

The Tozer car pulled out with much waving of hands and subdued banter. Ray drove, Connie sat between him and her father. . . .

Alden was softly telling someone, "Turn south into

the desert before you hit Newberry. That way you miss the State Inspection Station at Daggett. I guarantee you'll get through that way, George—"

George, raising his imperturbable face into the lantern-light, smiled crookedly.

"You should know, Beardsley. Good luck, then."

He took Katheren's arm, led her to the Packard, which inexplicably stood before the filling station. It had just been washed. The naked boy was putting in gas, and hitching up his wandering trunks with an elbow.

Caligula panted that he was glad to see them. Inexplicable was her husband's sudden show of affection. He kissed Caligula between the eyes before he ordered him up to his place behind the seat.

"The seat's wet," said Katheren, as soon as she was in.

"Can't be helped. Ought to dry soon in this heat, though."

Woar paid for the gas and drove out into the highway. Mae and Alden waved farewells, and the boy waved at the swarming bugs. Katheren fluttered her hand out the window, then settled back against the coolness of the damp cushions.

"What," she asked her husband, who was tucking the change in his pocket, "are you using for money these days?"

"I touched Beardsley for a hundred."

"You're amazing, Georgel"

The Packard swerved past the overloaded Nash. More waving of farewells. There was finality about it now, and Katheren knew she would see none of these people again. The adventure had come to its end.

An instant later, they passed the dark shape of the

Lagonda at the side of the road. Katheren recognized the spot, and shuddered.

"Forget it, my dear," her husband advised.

"That's likely. George, you'll have to tell me sooner or later. Everybody knows a coyote won't attack a man."

"So you know that too, do you?"

"Don't evade. I must know what happened to Lefty."

"My dear, he was killed. It isn't a cheery subject, is it? He met his death through the agency of canine teeth. Bite in the neck. Jugular vein severed. Blood drained out of him before he could get help. You and the police can brood about it till doomsday without altering the simple facts. The Lagonda's tank is dry. Presumably the man had to walk for gas. Alone, through the desert. He was attacked by coyotes and killed. May we leave it there?"

"George, I saw him fall from the running board. He wasn't alive then. And you washed this car. Even the seat. I do hope you got all the stains out. And you did kiss Caligula, you can't deny that. So if you won't tell me—"

He groaned. She ignored him.

"—I shall tell you. Caligula saved my life. He bit Lefty, in the side of the neck. Of course, it's nice of you to try to save my feelings, but I'm quite able to think things out for myself."

After a few miles, George said, "As one who recently practiced that profession, I believe you'd make a fairly good detective."

She had nothing to say about that for a few miles.

She was thinking.

She said, "I'm thinking we're lucky you were a detective, really. All of us. I suppose we won't have to

run from the police any more, after we reach San Francisco?"

"Right."

"And I can get a bath and a permanent wave and so on?"

"Right."

"That isn't really what I was thinking, George. I was really thinking about that office next to mine where I store all the old manuscripts and stuff. It's a nice office. With a desk and some chairs and a few pictures—and my secretary would probably do for both of us—and there's a door to it that opens right on the corridor, so if you wanted to put your name on it—H. G. B. WOAR, PRIVATE DETECTIVE—we could work it out somehow . . ."

"Katheren!"

"It's on my mind. I might as well get it off. I'm sorry."

"Rot!"

"I'm awfully sorry. It's good for me to admit it. After all, there's only one sensible way for you to make a living, and that's the way you've been used to all your life, so—"

Without taking his eyes from the highway, George seized the nearest available part of Katheren—her hand, as it happened—and kissed it fervently.

From the feel of his lips against her fingers, he must have been indulging in another of his funny, crooked smiles.











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